

Identity #2: Soul

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West Side Church of Christ
Searcy, Arkansas
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Scripture Reading

“And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.” (Genesis 2:7 KJV)

SOMETHING MORE

We are the most advanced civilization in the history of the world. Did you know the chief mode of transportation 200 years ago was the chief mode of transportation 2000 years ago?¹ And we went from the horse to the rocket ship in just two centuries. There is more technology in your phone than there was in the entire rocket that sent Neil Armstrong to the moon. Right now, you can look up the answer to questions that only a handful of people could have known, and for which people used to spend a fortune and travel around the world to discover. Think about it. We have the fastest means of transportation ever known to man, more information at our disposal and greater technology at our fingertips than ever before. And how are we doing? We are sick, scared, lonely, and emotionally drained. And we long for something more.

In 1993, psychologist James Hillman wrote a book with the title *We’ve Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy—And the World’s Getting Worse*.² I certainly know that our *longing* has gotten worse, statistically speaking.

In 2021, nearly 42 million adults in the US received treatment or counseling for mental health. That is lots more than 20 years ago. Try 50% more.³ 1 in 5 Americans will experience a mental illness at some point this year, and over 50% of us will be diagnosed

¹ <https://www.energy.gov/articles/history-electric-car>

² James Hillman and Michael Ventura, *We’ve Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy—And the World’s Getting Worse* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1993). Taken from James Bryan Smith, *The Good & Beautiful You: Discovering the Person Jesus Created You to Be* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2022) p. 13.

³ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/794027/mental-health-treatment-counseling-past-year-us-adults/>

with a mental illness at some point in our lives.⁴ The reasons are multiple. The sources of our pain are from every direction. The problem is so bad, some thoughtful Christians have begun writing works like this one titled *Trauma-Sensitive Theology*, with a telling subtitle: “thinking theologically in the era of trauma.”⁵

Many wonderful people you know and I know have gone to see mental health counselors and have taken medication. I’ve been to counselors. I’ve taken medication. In fact, both of those are gifts from God to be celebrated. We have some with those talents in this church, who have blessed many lives. I make this point to emphasize that we don’t need theological language to know deep in our bones that something is missing. Something isn’t right.

And it’s there “deep in our bones” that is the source of the problem. We experience greater and greater need, individually and as a society, because we are neglecting our soul. The psalmist, nearly 2000 years ago, reflected on this very fact: “Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me?” (Ps 43:5)

For this series called “Identity,” I am indebted to James Bryan Smith and his excellent little book *The Good & Beautiful You*. In his opening chapter, he says “our soul is the most essential, precious thing about any of us. And, paradoxically, our soul is something we are the least aware of [and] the least concerned about, until our lives begin to fall apart.”⁶

Don’t you sense it? It’s not just you and me. Listen to the music.

“Heart and Soul” (Huey Lewis & the News).

“Satisfy My Soul” (Bob Marley).

“Soul Survivor” (Rolling Stones).

Jesse McCartney says you have a beautiful soul, and Jewel asks, “Who will save your soul?” And we often look for healing in music. Perhaps, even, soul music.

PROBLEMS WITH “SELF”

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<https://www.cdc.gov/mentalhealth/learn/index.htm#:~:text=Mental%20illnesses%20are%20among%20the,some%20point%20in%20their%20lifetime.&text=1%20in%205%20Americans%20will,illness%20in%20a%20given%20year>.

⁵ Jennifer Baldwin, *Trauma-Sensitive Theology: Thinking Theologically in the Era of Trauma* (Cascade Books, 2018).

⁶ Smith, *The Good & Beautiful You*, pp. 12-13.

It’s fitting that we would turn to art, music, and counseling for help with our soul. The word “psychology” literally means “the study of the soul.” But for lots of people, “soul” sounds like a religious word. That’s because it is. When our cultural storyline changed from (1) you were wanted, designed, and made with a purpose—and to be human means something; to (2) “you are an accident, a by-product of a random chain of events,” we changed our identity from “soul” to “self.”

Think about it. We are told that independence means you can “do it yourself.” Mental health counselors will say “take care of yourself.” And I can be all by “myself.” But what in the world is a “self”? Well, it starts with something you can point to—like a body; and it focuses on the individual in isolation. In modern biology and anthropology, you are “a single self.” You are the product of meaningless purposelessness, so you have a meaningless, purposeless existence. You just “are.” You may have come *from* something just below you, but you did not come *for* something and you can’t be defined by anything other than your single, atomic self. “As such,” says Smith,

“the self is primarily interested in survival and finds its value in how it looks, what it possesses, and what others says about it. The self thrives on the currencies of money, sex, and power, on resumes, branding, accomplishments, notoriety, physical appearance, and entertainment. The self is built on *self*-reliance... In this sense, the self becomes an idol—everything revolves around the self.”

“The self can be easily misled into trusting in non-reality. Misled into thinking beauty, goodness, and truth are subjective and that money, fame, or success will make us happy. The self is taught to believe that perception is reality, and that what matters is what people think about us. The self consists of the accumulated ideas and images it has of itself, and the ideas and images it wants to project to others in order to find acceptance and affirmation. In short, the self is too small to bear the weight of who we really are. Only the soul can do that... [O]ur souls have built into them the way to wellness. We just have to listen to them.”⁷

Way back in 1989, a renowned philosopher named Charles Taylor tried to write a definitive study of what we mean by “identity” these days.⁸ And He called the book *Sources of the Self*. He details lots of possible answers but sees them as too narrow or too blind. And in the end, he sees hope for personal identity and for our communal identity—“what it means to be human”—in the story told by Jews and Christians, that

⁷ Smith, *The Good & Beautiful You*, p. 14.

⁸ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Harvard, 1989).

we find our identity and self-worth in the favor of God who affirms our identity in Him.⁹

Self is focused on what you see and touch, and it treats you as an isolated unit. But what if there is more to me than what you can see and touch? And what if that “more” to me is something that is a part, or longs to be a part, of something bigger and greater than myself? What do we do with that?

Last week, I made the statement that when God looks at you, He sees his own face. That’s more profound than you might imagine. In the late 1970’s, a developmental psychologist named Edward Tronick conducted an experiment. He gathered a group of little children (ranging in age from tiny infant to older toddler) and told their parents to sit across from them, but don’t show any facial response to anything they do or say. Be completely indifferent no matter how hard they plead for your attention. This was recorded. It only lasted for a few minutes, but I don’t have to tell you what it’s like to watch this in action. You can see the children grow in bewilderment, frustration, and distress, until they fall on the floor in frighteningly painful resignation as they experienced complete deprivation of any response.¹⁰

More and more, researchers in psychology, sociology, and anthropology are saying that you shouldn’t be treated as a mere biological entity. We long for connection and integration. With all the parts of me? Yes. With other people? Yes. With all of creation? Yes. And something more. Like a tractor beam, our souls cry out for connection with Truth, Beauty, and Goodness. In other words, your souls cry out for connection *with God*. It was St. Augustine who said, “God have made us for himself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in God.” Or, in the words of the Psalmist, “Like a deer thirsts for the water brook, my soul thirsts for God” (Psalm 42:1).

Of course it does. We learned last week that you were intended. Today, let me tell you: you were intended to live forever with God. When you feel disconnected, lost, alone, and discontented, don’t forget this: You were intended to enjoy life forever with God. That’s what your soul has been trying to say.

GENESIS 2:7 AND HUMANS AS SOULS

⁹ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 521.

¹⁰ Edward Tronick, et.al., “The Infant’s Response to Entrapment Between Contradictory Messages in Face-To-Face Interaction,” *Journal of the American Academy of Child Psychiatry* 17, no. 1 (Winter 1978): 1-13. This story is found in Andy Crouch, *The Life We’re Looking For: Reclaiming Relationship in a Technological World* (Convergent, 2022), p. 4.

God’s breath gave you life. That’s the story in Genesis 2:7. God formed man from the dust of the ground; then he breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became—according to some versions, “a living soul.” That is the KJV, ASV, GNV, even Eugene Peterson’s The Message. This translation helps, then obscures, then helps again! Let me show you what I mean.

First, how does “soul” help in the first place? It connects the fact that whatever human beings are, we are more than dust. And we are more than bodies. In fact, whatever “more” we are is a direct result of being given something by God. Spirit gives birth to spirit. And God breathed into our nostrils and we became something more. That’s where it helps.

So, where does it obscure? Well, the Hebrew phrase at the end of Genesis 2:7 is *nephesh kaya*, what the KJV translates “living soul.” The ESV translates “living creature.” Why? Because it’s the same phrase used in Genesis 1:21, where God makes the great sea creatures. Guess what? They are *nephesh kaya*. In 1:24, God makes all the land animals. Guess what? They are *nephesh kaya*. And in chapter 2, when God lets Adam name all the beasts of the field and the fowl of the air—they are called *nephesh kaya* (2:19). Technically, the language at the end of Genesis 2:7 simply says human beings came alive as earth creatures—just like every bird, fish, and hyena.

Oh, there’s more. What about that phrase “breath of life” in man’s nostrils? That’s not original with us either. When God sends the flood, that phrase is used again to equate humans with all animal life. God says the flood is coming to destroy all flesh under heaven “wherein is the breath of life” (Gen 6:17). And although “two and two of all flesh, wherein is the breath of life” entered the ark (Gen 7:15), the story was not so pleasant for those on the outside. “All in whose nostrils was the breath of life” on dry land died (Gen 7:22). In fact, to have the “breath of life” is simply another way to say you are a “living creature.” This is clearest right there in Genesis 1. In many versions (such as the ESV, NIV, and NRSV), verse 30 speaks of all creatures God made that creep upon the earth as those who have the “breath of life.” The King James simply says “all that has life.” I looked that verse up in the Hebrew and, curiously, the Hebrew of verse 30 doesn’t say “breath of life.” It says, yet again, *nephesh kaya*.

So “breath of life” and “living creature” do not make humans unique. Neither does the fact that we are “made of dust.” In Ecclesiastes 3:19-21, the Bible says here is something else humans have in common with all other living creatures: we are all “of the dust” and to dust we shall return.

So look at Genesis 2:7 once again, and if we read it this way, there is nothing special or unique about human beings; they are just another animal: “And the Lord God made

man from the dust of the ground, and placed in his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living creature." Just another animal.

But I didn't read that right. There are two key words in that verse that need to be revisited. I said the Lord "made" man of dust. But that's not what the verse says. It says God "formed" man from dust. If you go back and read Genesis 1, you will see that God doesn't touch anything. Did you notice that? "Let the earth bring forth grass...Let the waters bring forth living sea creatures...let the earth bring forth living land creatures." But the language shifts with humanity. In Genesis 1, the shift is from "let the earth bring forth" to "let us make...and God created." But the difference is even more stark in Genesis 2, where God, like a skilled artist with a potter's wheel, "formed" humanity. In fact, it's the Hebrew word for making pottery.

There's a second word that needs attention. I said the Lord "placed" in his nostrils the breath of life. But that's not what the verse says. It says God "breathed" into his nostrils the breath of life. It's the word in Isaiah, where the blacksmith "blows" the coals beneath the forge to make his weapon (Isa 54:16). But even more telling, the Spirit of God throughout the Old Testament is sometimes called spirit, sometimes called wind and sometimes called breath. When Ezekiel prophesies that one day God will bring his people back—He will gather his scattered tribes and make them one, thriving, powerful nation, do you know what imagery he uses? God takes him to a valley full of dead, dry bones. And He says to Ezekiel, "do you think these dry, dead bones can live again?" Ezekiel, says "only you know the answer to that, God!" And God says to the dry bones, "I am going to put breath back into you and you are going to live again." And the muscles reattached. The skin covered the bodies. But they were still dead. So God says "Come, O breath, from the four winds! Breathe into these dead bodies so they can live again." And you know this is all imagery. It points to what God will do to bring his nation back. But it's even more than that. It's imagery about how one day God will re-create his own chosen people in Christ. And the only way we who have become dead in our trespasses and sins and can truly be fully alive again in Christ is by the power of His Holy Spirit. His wind. His breath. And God says to Ezekiel this is what he is prophesying: "I will put my Spirit in you, and you will live again" (Ezek 37:13 NLT).

You know the New Testament language, don't you? That for all Christians we have God's spirit within us. That in Acts 2, to show that the Spirit was being poured out, there was the sound of a mighty rushing wind. Spirit. Wind. And then, finally, when Jesus tells his disciples after his resurrection that he is here to give them God's Holy spirit in power, do you remember what Jesus does? It's only recorded once. It's only in the Gospel of John. But Jesus "breathes on them" and says "receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:22).

It may be that every living creature on the planet is from dust, has breath of life in their nostrils, and are living creatures. But what Genesis 2:7 wants to tell you and me is that there is something different about humanity. The master potter formed us with his own hands, and he placed breathed the breathe of life into us. Spirit gives birth to spirit. So now we come full circle. A translation that at first proved helpful, then obscuring, is helpful once again. What can we say about humanity that might sum up in a single word what makes us different, special, a creature of earth but also deeply connected to God? May I suggest the word "soul."

SOUL AS THE UNITY OF YOU

This leads to a very important understanding that is sometimes lost on us. We are tempted to think the "soul" is the real you stuck deep down inside of your body somewhere; the story we might have unfortunately adopted at some point is that we need to shed our minds, wills, and bodies and then I can be the real "me": Just a soul. That is actually a story that reminds us more of the cultural "self" than the Biblical you.

Just as air travels throughout your veins to every corner of your body; Just as your thoughts and feelings end up affecting every square inch of you existence, think of the "breath of life" as the animating power that touches every single part of "you." And it remains the basis for the deepest truth about you. Our bodies grow up, grow old, and die. Our memory comes and goes. Our desires change. But something links "you" with everything about "you" at every stage; something makes you you no matter what your age, or your hair color, or your physical abilities. The "total you", thinking, feeling, caring, longing, embodied you: that's what we call the soul.

There are some verses that speak of God placing a soul or spirit inside you, but that is mostly due to language style (Isa 42:5; Zech 12:1). As N. T. Wright explains, soul as the "total you" is what the Hebrew word *nephesh* (the one used here in Genesis 2) regularly meant, and its most likely what Paul meant when he uses the Greek work *psyche*. For Bible writers, the "soul" simply meant "the whole human being, *seen from the point of view of one's inner life*; that mixture of feeling, understanding, imagination, thought and emotion that are in fact bound up with the life of the body and the mind" but are not simply the result of how you feel or think.¹¹ It's the whole you. The total package. And, more specifically, the thing that connects all the parts of you to make one total package. And *you* were meant to be *you* forever.

This is why things that hurt your body, hurt your soul. This is why negative thoughts can lead to a sick stomach. This is why positive thinking can cause adrenaline to give

¹¹ N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), p. 283.

you extraordinary stamina and strength. This is why feeling guilt or shame can affect every aspect of your life. And it’s why doing wrong or believing wrong or living wrong doesn’t feel right. You are an integrated whole.

IMAGE AND LIKENESS OF GOD

We did some spade work in Genesis 2:7 to tease out what makes human special. But we could do the same thing with ease by looking at Genesis 1 where the text says God made humans in the “image” and “likeness” of God. What does that mean? For 3rd century Christians like Tertullian and Origen, every single person on the planet is in the “image” of God. Maybe it’s because we are endowed with reason that separates us from the animals and makes us like God (this was Augustine’s view). Or maybe “image” refers to the capacity granted to no other creature—the ability to “relate and to partake in the life of God” (that was Athanasius’ view). But whatever we mean by “image” of God—which applies to everyone, “likeness” of God (according to Tertullian and Origen) is something that might be missing in us, due to sin, but is something we can and do aspire to.¹² Origen thought we would regain our “likeness” in the afterlife. But Tertullian thought that it could be renewed even in this life by the renewing of God’s Holy Spirit. Most later Christian thinkers rejected separating “image” and “likeness” like that. But Tertullian’s point—that something about God is true in all of us, but something about us is incomplete until it reconnects with God—is a powerful truth that resonates with what we see in Scripture. Listen to Tertullian’s words:

[In Baptism] death is abolished by the washing away of sins: for the removal of guilt also removes the penalty. Thus humanity is restored to God into ‘his likeness.’ For he had originally been ‘in his image.’ The state of being ‘in the image of God’ relates to his form; ‘in the likeness’ refers to his eternity: for humanity receives back that Spirit of God which at the beginning was received from God’s inbreathing, but which was afterwards lost through falling away.¹³

THE SOUL’S LONGING

Words and phrases like “falling away” and “sin” are religious words. If you are not religious, let me use different words. Karl Jung said we all sense a “hole in our soul.” Or to twist a line from Apollo 13, “Houston, we have a problem.” Things are not as they should be. We know that in our bones. And we know that in our soul.

¹² See Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 360-62. See Tertullian, *de baptism*, 5; Origen, *de principiis*, III.iv.1.

¹³ Tertullian, *de baptismo*, 5.

What Christians believe is that this hole in our soul is more than just wrong decisions you or I have made—although that contributes to the problem. We use the word “sin” to refer to the great rift between us and God. The problem with a capital P.

If you are vaguely familiar with Christians or with church, you might have heard or thought you heard that sin is your fault, you messed up, and God will judge you because of your sins. If you have heard that, I’d like to give you a different starting point.

My daughter is very young—too young for “the talk.” But at some point her mother and I will have to have “the talk” (or, as I’ve been counseled by wise Christian counselors, a series of “talks,” all age-appropriate, throughout her life). And I’ll be honest with you—I’m a bit nervous about how exactly to have those talks. But one piece of advice I will treasure forever is this one line: “whatever you do, don’t help them learn something they will have to unlearn later.” How wise that is.

If you have some one-liners about sin you’ve heard at church, I would like to sit with you privately and spend some time doing some work to help you unlearn and relearn. I believe that I, and you, and everyone else have made bad choices. And I believe that sin is real. And I believe that God will judge sin (one of the things I’d like to explain to you is why that is a good thing—something you want as well, if you’ve ever been a victim of someone’s sin against you). But I wish all people could start their thinking with this great line from Thomas Aquinas: we are judged, condemned or hurt not so much for our sins, as we are hurt **by** our sins. Our poor decisions, and the world we have to live in as a result of other people’s poor decisions, bring pain into our lives. Separation from God—running away from what is true, beautiful, and good—makes everything bad. And we sense it deep in our bones. And maybe even deeper than that.

There are some deep truths about the soul that I think everyone senses to be true. James Bryan Smith provides this chart that I have found enormously helpful. I hope you do as well.

The soul cannot endure harm to our bodies. We long to see our bodies as sacred. And Christians believe that in Jesus Christ, we see our bodies as sacred, and we see ourselves as part of His sacred body.

The soul cannot endure feeling unwanted. We long to be wanted and desired. And in Jesus Christ, we know that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit sees us as deeply wanted.

The soul cannot endure feeling shame, guilt, boredom or the effects of sin. Our soul cannot endure being disconnected with God or being nothing more than a meaningless

victim of circumstances. We long for something more—intimate connection with God, being loved without condition, made alive and called to an adventure, given meaning and purpose, and forgiveness forever. And Christians believe all of this is available in Jesus Christ.¹⁴ The Christian can sing, “Whatever my lot, it is well with my soul.”

This is because our identity is grounded in the person of Jesus Christ. Christians believe Christ is the express image and total likeness of God. He shows us what God always had in mind for humanity. What it looks like for the image of God to think, act, and love in total harmony with Truth, Beauty, and Goodness Himself—who we call Father, Son, and Spirit. And “salvation” is not buying a ticket for a fiery chariot at the end of the world. It is release from the guilt, shame, and consequences of sin, it means reuniting with what is true, beautiful, and good; **and** it means forming a bond that will continue forever. As we were always intended.

¹⁴ Smith, *The Good & Beautiful You*, p. 23.