

## The Division of Soul and Spirit

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**M**an was made in the image and likeness of God (**Genesis 1:26, 1 Corinthians 11:7, and James 3:9**). To what degree this is true, we cannot say, but the words in these passages seem to indicate that we resemble Him both in appearance and capacity. God has a form (**Philippians 2:6**), and apparently, ours bears some limited likeness to it. And God possesses qualities that He has passed on to us: we are relational, experience emotions, and have a will. And like Him, we are three in one: He is Father, Word, and Spirit; we are spirit, soul, and body (**1 Thessalonians 5:23**).

Distinguishing between man's material (body) and immaterial (soul and spirit) parts is straightforward. One can be experienced through the senses; the others cannot. But what of the difference between the soul and spirit? This is more difficult. Our eyes and ears are of no help to us. But the word of God makes it possible: "*For the word of God is living and powerful...piercing even to the division of soul and spirit*" (**Hebrews 4:12**). In the paragraphs below, we will attempt to let the Word do its dividing.

Before focusing on that division, however, it is worth noting that the soul and the spirit do not operate exclusively of each other in every way. They overlap emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually. Emotionally, both can be calm (**Psalms 131:2, Proverbs 17:27**), at rest (**Jeremiah 6:16, 2 Corinthians 2:13**) rejoice (**Psalms 35:9, Luke 1:47**), be troubled (**Psalms 6:3, Daniel 2:1**), sorrowful (**Matthew 26:38, 1 Samuel 1:15**), in anguish (**Genesis 42:21, Exodus 6:9**), feel faint (**Jonah 2:7, Psalm 77:3**), and grieve (**Job 30:25, Daniel 7:15**).

Intellectually, both can possess knowledge (**Joshua 23:14, 1 Corinthians 2:11**). And spiritually, both can seek God (**Deuteronomy 4:29, Isaiah 26:9**), serve God (**Deuteronomy 10:12, Romans 1:9**), and sin (**Habbakuk 2:4, Isaiah 29:24**).

But there *are* things unique to each. And in these, the division of soul and spirit begins to emerge.

Only the soul is connected to the appetite. God commanded the nation of Israel to "*afflict [their] souls*" on the Day of Atonement (**Leviticus 23:27**). An Israelite could voluntarily vow to "*afflict her soul*" at other times, as well. But what did that mean? The following exchange between Israel and God provides the answer. Israel complained: "*Why have we fasted...and You have not seen? Why have we afflicted our souls, and You take no notice?*" God answered: "*Is it a fast that I have chosen, a day for a man to afflict his soul?*" And later, "*If you extend your soul to the hungry and satisfy the afflicted soul, then your light shall dawn in the darkness, and your darkness shall be as the noonday*" (**Isaiah 58:3, 5, 10**). To experience hunger, then (either through intentional fasting or otherwise), is to have an afflicted soul (see also **Isaiah 29:8**, which includes thirst). No such connection is ever made with the spirit.

The soul is connected to sexual desire. This is borne out in Genesis: "*And when Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite, prince of the country, saw [Dinah], he took her and lay with her, and violated her. His soul was strongly attracted to Dinah the daughter of Jacob*" (**34:2-3**). Later, Hamor spoke to Dinah's brothers, saying, "*The soul of my son Shechem longs for your daughter*" (**34:8**). Sexual desire, connected with the soul, is not wrong in and of itself, but Shechem's response to it certainly had been. As we shall see later, Shechem's spirit could have kept his soul's desire within its proper parameters.

Interestingly, desire of all kinds is associated with the soul in Scripture (godly, ungodly, and otherwise). Saul's soul desired to apprehend David (**1 Samuel 23:20**). The soul of the wicked desires evil (**Proverbs 21:10**). The soul of the lazy man desires any number of things (**Proverbs 13:4**). And the souls of the righteous desire God. Desire can take many forms, but throughout Scripture, it is associated with the soul, not the spirit.

And the same is true for weariness. Three times in Scripture, we read of weary souls (**Proverbs 25:25; Jeremiah 4:31; 31:25**), but never of weary spirits. This may be due to the soul's connection with the physical body (evidenced in its association with appetite and sexual desire). The body gets weary, physically and emotionally, and the soul is touched by that.

Turning to the spirit, we see how it differs from the soul.

The spirit wills. Those who donated materials for the construction of the Tabernacle and its accouterments were those "*whose spirit was willing*" (**Exodus 35:21**). Jesus observed of His slumbering disciples, "*The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak*" (**Matthew 26:41**). The soul can desire, but it will never be satisfied until the spirit wills/resolves to do something about it. This helps illuminate the many references in Scripture to God stirring up, raising up, moving, and even hardening the spirits of groups and individuals (e.g., **Deuteronomy 2:30, 2 Chronicles 26:22, Ezra 1:5, Jeremiah 51:11, Haggai 1:14**). Through circumstances and His word, God indirectly acted upon the spirits of kings, leaders, and people. And according to their nature, they responded for good or ill. Some spirits proved *willing*, and some *willful*.

Additionally, there is evidence to suggest that the spirit serves as the seat of understanding, thought, and reason. Elihu justified his decision to offer his opinion on Job's situation by asserting, "*But there is a spirit in man, and the breath of the Almighty gives him understanding*" (**Job 32:8**). Elihu had been slow to speak due to comparative youth (**Job 32:6-7**), but he had a spirit just like those other men, and so he too possessed understanding – the ability to draw distinctions and make assessments/judgments. This capacity of the spirit for thought and reason accords with other qualities attributed to it. Only the spirit (never the soul) is said to be proud or humble: "*Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall. Better to be of a humble spirit...*" (**Proverbs 16:18-19; cf. Ecclesiastes 7:8; Proverbs 29:23**). What are pride and humility? They have to do with what we *think* – about ourselves, particularly: "*For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly...*" (**Romans 12:3**). Those who are humble in spirit are being *reasonable*.

Finally, the spirit seems to possess a more elevated spiritual dimension/capacity than does the soul (at least, while we remain in the flesh). When God gave the Corinthians the gift of tongues, it enabled them to prophesy, sing, and pray with their spirits (**1 Corinthians 14:2, 14-16**). Nothing is said of the gift engaging their souls. And in closing his letters, Paul three times expressed his desire that the grace of the Lord Jesus, or the Lord Jesus Himself, would be with the brethren's spirits (**Galatians 6:18; Philemon 25; 2 Timothy 4:22**). But he never expressed such thoughts relating to their souls. The *spirit*, it may be, is more *spiritual*.

So that's the best I've been able to do at discovering the difference between the soul and spirit. If you have something to add or see something that doesn't add up, please let me know!