

“Soul”

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Text: Psalm 42

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The idea of “soul” is coming back into vogue in our society. I think that’s great, for it is a wonderful concept. Soul is an ancient idea that has been sidelined in this century by psychology and the sciences. It is impossible to define precisely, but it is not meant to be understood as much as it’s meant to be appreciated. Within the Hebrew tradition the soul was physically associated with the neck and throat, and so you find in the Old Testament that the soul “hungers and thirsts” for nurture and for God. The physical activity most commonly associated with soul in the Bible was breathing, or “the breath of life”. Throughout the Middle East area people commonly accepted that the sign of continued life was the fact that you breathed. So “soul” had to do with what was essential for living – life’s essence. Without soul one could not live.

Just flipping through the Old Testament can help one appreciate the meaning of soul. You will find associated with feelings, emotions and moods. This is especially so of emotions of the spiritual kind: grief, joy, pain, peace, longing and love, hatred and scorn, loathing and weariness, guilt. The condition of one’s soul, one’s spirituality, of one’s relationship with God, is expressed in these kinds of emotion. The author Thomas More is a psychotherapist and a writer / speaker on spirituality. In his best selling book, “Care of the Soul”, he writes, “The emotional complaints of our age that therapists hear all the time in sessions are: emptiness; meaninglessness; vague depression; disillusionment about marriage, family and relationships; a loss of values; a yearning for personal fulfillment; a hunger for spirituality. All these symptoms reflect a loss of soul and let us know what the soul craves”.

Now in listening to these characteristics you may be thinking, “this sounds like psychology”, and you would be partly right. Let’s not forget where the word psychology comes from. The Greek word for soul is “psyche”, and so the word “psychology” literally means “the study of the soul”. In our modern era the spiritual aspect has been sliced out of psychology, but this is beginning to change, and spirituality – soul – is finding itself being re-incorporated into psychology. Carl Jung put it this way: “every psychological problem is ultimately a matter of religion”.

The highest attribute of the soul is its capacity to long after God, and we find many expressions of this in the Psalms. You can lift up your soul to God (25.1), the soul can wait and hope in God (33.20), thirst after God (42.1,2), praise God (30.12), find its rest and peace in God (62.1,2). So what is the soul? It’s not an organ, nor is it the spiritual part of our personality. The soul is us, it is the essential “me”. It’s that mix in us that helps us understand the world and relate to the world... something that is fundamentally spiritual. It’s that part of us that yearns to connect with God.

As spiritual people, it is important for us to do what is traditionally called “soul work”. This is integrating faith with life, putting our life experience into perspective with God, finding meaning in what we do, discovering our connectedness with God, discerning the path God would have us take as followers of Jesus. To do this takes, what writer Frederick Buechner calls, “listening to your life”. Soul work is different from spiritual practices such as meditation on scripture. Soul work starts with thinking about who you are, what you are about – your motivations and viewpoints – with the purpose of coming to a greater sense of who you are and who you might become as a child of God. Soul work is about the spiritual journey. Jean Calvin recognized this. In his preface to his book, “The Institutes of the Christian Religion”, he wrote “You cannot know yourself unless you know God; and you cannot know God unless you know yourself”. Soul work is about knowing yourself, and knowing yourself as a child of God. It’s about coming into a deeper relationship with God from a starting point of appreciating your life and needs.

Psalm 42 is an excellent example of someone doing soul work. In this “journal entry” the Psalmist is struggling with something each of us has to struggle with at one point or other in their faith – the apparent absence of God in his life. Soul work starts right where you are at in life, and where the Psalmist is at here is not a good position. He has found himself living on the edge of the Kingdom of Israel. He is far from his home of Jerusalem. He is far away from the Temple, that central meeting place with God in worship. He wrote, “I used to go along in the crowd and lead them in procession to the house of God” (vs. 4), but now he can’t. He is dogged by his enemies, forced to find cover in among the mountains of Hermon. Detached from his home, the Temple, and under persecution, he is beginning to doubt God. As he looks at his situation, he cries out in desperation, “I say to God, my rock, “Why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?”” (vs. 9). How many times have we heard ourselves or someone else say, “why is this happening to me and why aren’t you helping me God?” And if this weren’t enough, his enemies taunt him. “They say to me all day long, “So, where is your God now?” (vs. 3). He has no answer, because he is asking himself the very same question. “My tears” he writes, “have been my food day and night” (vs. 42). This is a man on the edge.

The Psalmist here is spending time listening to his life – he is doing soul work. He is trying to put experience and faith together, and two things come out of it.

First, he explores his life – his soul – to really understand it. He asks himself, “Why art thou cast down, O my soul? And why art thou disquieted within me?” He is trying to understand not just himself but, more importantly, he’s trying to understand what part of his faith is being pushed. Then, as an answer to his own question, he grabs hold of one core aspect of faith he needs, saying, “Hope in God; for I shall yet praise Him for the help of His presence” (vs. 5). So what we find in this psalm is a person reflecting on his experiences, observing the ways he frames and understands those experiences, and then in the midst of these reflections acknowledges his spiritual need: hope.

But a second thing comes out of his soul work as well. In the pain and desperation, he chose to go to God. He goes with angry questions – “why have You forgotten me?” – but He also goes expectantly. The Psalm’s opening line makes this so clear, “As the deer pants for the waters of a

brook, so my soul pants for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the Living God” (vs. 1,2). He goes through the darkness of being cast down, through the doubt and despair and uncertainty, to finally come back with confidence: “The Lord will command His lovingkindness in the daytime, and His song will be with me in the night” (vs. 8). In other words, in his despair he finds an affirmation of faith to cling to...to give him hope.

This is soul work at its best: grappling with where you are in life, sorting out how that relates to faith, bringing it honestly before God, seeking to grow in faith through it. Reflection on scripture – bringing the Word of God to bear on our lives – is one half of growing in faith. Doing soul work – listening to your life, and bringing your life to God – is the other side of the coin of an active spirituality.

An example. For 6 years I was an after-hours chaplain at University Hospital in London Ontario. For one week at a time I was on the “electronic leash” (a pager).

Over one Friday and Saturday I got called in to the Emergency three times to be with families who had suddenly and unexpectedly lost family members through heart attacks. The three people who had died suddenly were all relatively young, in their 50’s and 60’s. Understandably the three families were all shaken to their core. In the days that followed for me things were not quite right. Once I recognized that it took a further two days to figure out what was bothering me, and a couple of days before I felt I could bring it before God in Prayer. As I sat and listened to my life – doing my soul work – I realized with clarity that these three deaths had scared me. I saw close up and in technicolour that life comes to an end for us all... including me. That forced me to revisit Christ’s promise of eternal life. In the end, like the Psalmist, I found myself saying, “Why are you cast down, O my soul? Why have you become disquieted within me? Hope in God”.

Did I walk away from that time in blissful confidence? Not completely. Did that worry about my mortality simply disappear? Not entirely. But I learned that the thought of my own death can unsettle me, and I have found that clinging to God “my rock” can ease that anxiety. But in this is an important point. Caring for one’s soul, not fixing one’s problems, is what soul work is often about. It may not be possible to change your life situation and that is not soul work’s purpose. Rather, it is about finding meaning in the struggles of life, giving depth to ordinary life, discovering the presence of God in one’s life. And in that, find hope in God and find peace in your situation.

Care for the soul – soul work – can change us. In considering how things are now you can begin to move beyond to how things might be. You can begin to envision an alternative future for yourself, a meaningful future that knows with some certainty that God is in it with you. Knowing that life can be different sparks hope. And hope is a powerful thing, for it can prompt us to trust in God. Growing in trust in turn builds our relationship with God. And as we grow in God, we grow our soul.