

All All Your Soul

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Good morning! It's so good to worship God together. Thank you to our tech and worship teams for all they do.

If we haven't met, my name is Tom. I'm one of the pastors here, and I want to welcome those here at our Franklin Road campus, those at our Shelby Street campus, and those who are watching online. I especially want to welcome anyone who's newer or joining us for the first time. We know engaging with a new community can be scary, but we pray you feel at home here and that you'll partner with this church family as we all learn to follow Jesus.

We're in week two of the **ALL** series, discovering what it means to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Today, we get to talk about soul. What is the soul? Why is it important that we love God with our soul? How exactly do we do that?

I need to start with a confession. I've been a follower of Jesus for over 35 years, and a pastor for over 25 years, but until recently, everything I've thought about the "soul" was at best incomplete and at worst totally wrong.

I was taught this bedtime prayer as a child; maybe you know it, too: "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. And if I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take."

Growing up in Long Island, NY, I wasn't exposed to much country music, but I do remember a song by the Charlie Daniels Band whose opening lyric tells how "the devil went down to Georgia lookin' for a soul to steal."

But beyond children's prayers and song lyrics, people use this word "soul" a lot:

- "I'm looking for my "soul mate."
- "That person is a lost soul."
- "That guy, he's got a lot of issues—bless his soul."
- When someone's desperate, we might say they're willing to "sell their soul."
- Peyton Manning has been called the "soul of the Colts" for the 18 years he played here, just like Steve Jobs was the "soul of Apple" until his death in 2011.

To make sure I did the exhaustive research and preparation needed for this message, I watched the movie *Soul*. It's the story of a music teacher trying to reunite his soul with his body after a sudden accident. Friends, this is what I've thought of, spiritually, regarding the "soul": our soul is the part of us that will exist somewhere in the "great beyond" after our time on earth.

What's interesting is that the word "soul" appears over 750 times in the Bible, but rarely does it refer to our existence beyond this life. In the first part of the Bible, called the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for soul is "nephesh"; its best translation is the word "throat"—the part of our body where air and food pass through to sustain our life.

In the New Testament, the word "soul" appears 98 times. The Greek word is "psyche" (pronounced "psoo-khay"). It's where we get our English word "psyche."

Fifty-eight times in the New Testament this word is translated as "soul," but forty times it's translated as the word "life," like when Jesus taught in his first sermon, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your

life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes?" (Matt 6:25). Here the word translated "life" is the same word translated elsewhere as "soul."

Later in His ministry, Jesus said, "For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it" (Mark 8:35). Again, the word translated "life" is "psyche," the word often rendered as "soul."

When Jesus was describing why He came to earth, He said, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Once again, that word "life" is also the word for "soul."

What then is the soul? Well, to be honest, the Bible doesn't give us a specific definition of the soul, but theologian Dallas Willard explained it like this:

What is running your life at any given moment is your soul. Not external circumstances, not your thoughts, not your intentions, not even your feelings, but your soul. The soul is that aspect of your whole being that correlates, integrates, and enlivens everything going on in the various dimensions of the self. The soul is the life center of human beings.

In his book *Soul Keeping*, John Ortberg put it this way: "Your soul is what integrates, connects, and binds together your will (heart), your thoughts (mind), and your strength (habits and behaviors)."

People way smarter than me tell us that the soul is like a bucket that holds together our heart, mind, and strength. This is our soul.

In a season when doctors and therapists are encouraging "self-care" more than ever, it's tempting to spend the rest of our time looking at Bible verses that teach us how to care for this mysterious thing called our "soul." But if we did that, we'd miss God's intended purpose for our soul.

John Ortberg continues his explanation: "God designed us so that our choices, our thoughts and desires, and our behavior would be in perfect harmony with each other and would be powered by an unbroken connection with God."

The soul is designed to be connected to, and empowered by, God. We see evidence of this all the way back in the first few chapters of the Bible when God created the earth, sun, moon, stars, planets, plants, and animals. "Then God created man and woman in His own image, male and female He created them" (Genesis 2:7), and He gave them this thing called a soul so that they could live in unbroken connection to the creator and sustainer of the universe.

But Adam and Eve chose to walk their own path, causing the connection with God to be broken, and the whole rest of the Scriptures reveal God's desire and effort to restore us back to how we were designed.

Friends, this was God's design back then, and it's still God's design and invitation today.

The Bible has lots to say about the benefits of a soul connected to God and the struggle we face to remain there.

David, a king who used to herd sheep for a living, wrote, "The Lord is my shepherd, I will not be in need. He lets me lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul (Psalm 23:1-3 NASB).

The Scriptures teach us time and again that the soul was designed to rest in God's presence, yet we live at an unsustainable pace. Let's just say it: if you're alive, chances are you're busy!

- If you're the president of a company or a stay at home mom, you're busy!
- If you're a teacher or a student, you're busy!
- If you're single or married, with kids or no kids, young, middle aged, or retired—we're all busy!

You know what? Jesus was busy! He had three years to show a new way of living in God's kingdom and train His disciples to carry on His message. As busy as Jesus was, have you ever noticed that He was never hurried? There's a big difference between being busy and being hurried. "Busy" is a full schedule, with lots of activities; it's physically demanding, yet reminds us of our need for God moment by moment. "Hurried" is being preoccupied, unable to be fully present in the different activities we're in; it's an inner and spiritually draining condition of the soul that causes us to be unavailable to God.

World renowned cardiologist Meyer Freidman came up with a diagnosis called "hurry sickness." He defined it as a continuous struggle and unremitting attempt to accomplish more and more in less and less time. And guess what? He said that in the 1950s!

Now it's seventy years later and our souls feel crushed by our pace of life. We are more irritable, sensitive, and restless than ever before. We know we can't maintain this pace of life, but we don't know how to stop, so, with disordered priorities, using every avenue the world offers, we try to escape the pain we feel in our hurried souls which leads to further frustration, guilt, and shame!

If any of that sounds familiar, please know you are not alone. A little over three years ago, I switched roles here at The Creek from leading worship to overseeing the adult discipleship team. I love getting to serve alongside a great team of staff and volunteers, but this transition was challenging for all the obvious reasons, and it happened to take place right around the time my oldest son, Josh, was heading off to college. Between the pressures of shifting roles and figuring out how to raise adulting kids, and then COVID, I wasn't just busy—I was hurried. I had all the symptoms—I was irritable, sensitive, frenzied, numb, frustrated, and feeling distant from God, until in October of last year, I was diagnosed by a counselor with "burnout."

You may not know this, but the elders at The Creek care for the staff here very well. They understand the spiritual and emotional toll that ministry takes, so they provide a sabbatical to our ministry staff every seven years that we serve. For a few weeks earlier this year, I was blessed with the opportunity to take an extended time away to reconnect my soul to God. But it wasn't easy. At first, I transferred my "hurry" from work to "hurry" at home. But very slowly, God showed me a better way to live.

You may not be able to take a sabbatical. It may feel like a stretch just trying to get 15 minutes of peace and quiet in your own home. But this better way of living is something Jesus has been inviting His followers to for over 2000 years. Jesus said in Matthew 11:28-29, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."

This thing called a "yoke" is a farming tool used to hook two oxen together, often with an older and more experienced ox leading a younger, less experienced one, while together they do the work that needs to be done.

Friends, this is our invitation from Jesus: to travel at His side, learning from Him how to shoulder the burden of our days, moving from burnout to "soul rest."

To do this practically, we first need to reject any shame we might feel for our hurried lifestyle. Shame only paralyzes us, keeping us disconnected from God. Instead, I believe we need to do three things:

- Accept our limitations.
- Confess to God.
- Remember we never walk alone.

We all have limitations: limited time, energy, resources, abilities, control. One of the reasons we live hurried lives is that we don't accept these limitations.

Once we accept that we're not superhuman, we can confess to God the times we've chosen to use most of our free time to get lost in Netflix, social media, games on our phone, or the hobbies and interests we hoped would bring rest but really didn't.

Then we need to remember the last thing Jesus said to his followers: "I am with you always!" (Matthew 28:20). Jesus knew the best thing He could give a hurried soul is a better way to carry out our daily responsibilities with Him by our side!

Here's another purpose of the soul found in the Scripture: our souls were designed to be fully satisfied in God. Psalm 42:1-2 reads, "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul longs after You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, the living God." This is both a cry to God and a declaration of God's design for the soul.

Look at this next one. David writes, "Because your steadfast love is better than life . . . my soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food" (Psalm 63:3-5 ESV).

At the risk of causing you to think about lunch, imagine the feeling you have after eating a good pizza, a good burger or steak, a good pasta dish, a good dessert, good tacos, a good watermelon—you taste it and go, "Oh, yeah! That's sooo good!"

Friends, your soul was designed to find satisfaction like that IN GOD! But our souls seem to crave more, don't they? We believe the grass is always greener somewhere else. Take our jobs for example. A research group from the University of Chicago listed the ten jobs people were the happiest in and the ten jobs where people were most miserable. What they found was the ten jobs where people were miserable were the ones that paid more and offered higher status. The ten jobs people were happiest in offered less money and less status, but brought a higher sense of satisfaction! The main thing you bring home from work is not a paycheck—it's your soul!

To a world that's always craving "more," Jesus warned, "What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?" (Mark 8:36). We were made for soul-satisfaction, but we don't find it in things like our jobs, we find it in God.

That leads to the next struggle we face: our souls were designed for gratitude, yet we often feel entitled. A study was done of 186 men and women, with an average age of 66. They were asked to rate how grateful they felt for the people, places, or things in their lives. Interestingly, the people who were the most grateful were also the healthiest. How's that possible? Because our souls were designed for gratitude.

James, the half-brother of Jesus, reminds us that "Every good and perfect gift comes down from the Father who created all the lights in the heavens" (James 1:17 CEV).

Friends, you can't be grateful for something you think you deserve. Without gratitude, the soul (the life center for heart, mind, and strength) suffers. But we all find ourselves in that mode at times, don't we, where we forget what we've been given and feel like we deserve more than we have? "I'm tired of being single; I deserve to be in a relationship." "I'm a good employee; I deserve a raise or a vacation." "I work hard; I deserve to sit and watch TV when I get home or buy whatever I want." The more we think we're entitled to, the less we'll be grateful for what we have.

Try this experiment sometime. One day, complain about EVERYTHING—how you look, how you feel, what you see, your friends, your work, what you wish you had. For some of us this won't be a stretch. Watch how people around you respond and see how you feel at the end of the day.

The next day, be grateful for EVERYTHING—your relative health and wealth compared to the rest of the world, the beauty outside even if it's raining, the food in your fridge, the clothes that you have, everything! Again, watch the impact it has on the people in your life and on how you feel.

I love this from evangelist Billy Graham: "Grumbling and gratitude are, for the child of God, in conflict. Be grateful and you won't grumble. Grumble and you won't be grateful." And this from Chuck Swindoll: "Gratitude is a decision of the will . . . the choice resides squarely with us. Deciding to be thankful is no easy task. It takes work."

Perhaps the best thing you can do, before you even get out of bed in the morning, is thank God for three things. Write them down in a notebook, or post it note, and look at it throughout the day. You'll be amazed what this will do for your soul!

Here's the last one we have time for, but it may be the most important, and it sums up the others: the soul was designed to follow God's instructions, yet we doubt His ways are best.

Peter, one of Jesus' closest disciples, was trying to help Christians live "in the world" without "doing what the world does" when he wrote, "Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul" (1 Peter 2:11). Friends the war waging against the soul is sin. It's defined in the Bible as knowing the good we should do and choosing not to do it. And this war revolves entirely around our answer to this question: is God's way the best way?

The great misconception is that Christianity stands in the way of a good life, that following God is all about rules and things you can't do. Part of that stigma comes from legalistic Christians through the years, but part of it comes from us doubting that God's ways are higher and way better than ours!

Look at these words from Psalm 19:7: "The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple." The irony is that when we choose to obey a spiritual code of morality that goes beyond our own preferences and opinions, instead of restricting our joy, it increases it! Following God's instructions for life refreshes the soul.

The Bible's not a list of rules given to keep the joy OUT of life, it's a guide to setting the captive free from being a slave to sin, guilt, and shame to experience the joy of God's love, peace, presence, and purpose like never before.

Perhaps the reason your soul feels the way it does is because you know the good you should do, and you've chosen not to trust that God's ways are best. Maybe you don't know how to reconnect to God, or if He even wants you back?

The good news is, the Bible tells us that while we were living in direct opposition to His instructions for life, God sent His son, Jesus, to pay the penalty for our sin, making a way once again to be reconnected to, and empowered by, God!

Hurried life? Seeking more? Ungrateful? Doubting that God's ways are best? Consider this from Psalm 103:1-5.

Praise the Lord, my soul; all my inmost being, praise His holy name.

Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not all His benefits—

who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.