

Solidify Your Soul

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

1st in a six-week series

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Genesis 1:26–27, 2:7, 21–22 (NRSV)

²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

²⁷ So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

⁷ then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.

²¹ So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. ²² And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.

Revelation 20:4 (NRSV)

⁴ Then I saw thrones, and those seated on them were given authority to judge. I also saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years.

Matthew 5:1–12 (NRSV)

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

³ “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵ “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶ “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷ “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸ “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹ “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰ “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

How is it with your soul? Solid? Or a bit crumbly?

What are we really? Of what are we made? Are we souls trapped in bodies waiting to be freed so our souls can return to heaven? Or are we whole creatures, made in the image of God, with every bit of us made good and destined for eternity?

Many of us grew up in the church being taught that our true selves are called “souls” and that when we die, we are set free from these fragile bodies so that we may enter heaven with God. But the truth is that this view is much more indebted to Plato than to the Bible. This mistake, that has a long history in the Church, causes us to overlook the truth that just as Jesus was resurrected, so shall we be resurrected -- bodily.

So we come to this series preparing to be surprised, as Rev. Arthur Jones helps us to grasp that we called to solidify our souls, as it were, to know and to live as the solid souls God created.

To help us get off on the right foot, here is the entry on “soul” from the Lexham Bible Dictionary. Notice that the Greek *psyche*, sometimes translated “soul,” is best understood as “life” or “self.”

SOUL (נֶפֶשׁ, *nephesh*, ψυχή, *psychē*). Life or being, with an ultimate source in God.

Old Testament Usage

The two terms used for “soul” in Scripture—נֶפֶשׁ (*nephesh*) and ψυχή (*psychē*)—both show remarkable breadth in terms of contextual usage. One study of the Hebrew term yielded over 750 uses, which can be sorted into 10 categories. Major usages communicate:

- indicate meanings of desire (Pss 25:1; 42:2)
- personal or individual being (Gen 12:5; Lev 2:1)
- a conscious self (Lev 11:44–45)
- emotional state (Gen 26:35; Job 21:4; Eccl 7:9).

Even animals are at times qualified as possessing a נֶפֶשׁ (*nephesh*), evident in their animate status (Gen 1:20–24).

The holistic anthropology of the Old Testament is evident early in Genesis, where נֶפֶשׁ (*nephesh*) refers to the finished created individual, embodied and breathing: “Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being (נֶפֶשׁ, *nephesh*;)” (Gen 2:7 NIV). In later poetic Hebrew, the psalmist juxtaposes soul and body: “My soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land” (Psa 63:1 NIV; compare Psa 84:2). The root of נֶפֶשׁ (*nephesh*), according to E. Jacob, means “to breathe” in a physical sense—a decisive mark of the living creature (Jacob, “Psyche,” 1343). This indicates the closeness of נֶפֶשׁ (*nephesh*) to the literal word for breath or spirit in the Hebrew (רוּחַ, *ruach*).

In the New Testament, the term ψυχή (*psychē*) is often translated as “life” (Mark 10:45; Acts 20:24; Rev 12:11). Like the Hebrew term נֶפֶשׁ (*nephesh*), the Greek term ψυχή (*psychē*) has a wide semantic domain. In New Testament passages where it appears, Hellenistic philosophical influence is sometimes visible—particularly in passages communicating a distinction between body and soul and the possibility of severing the two (Matt 10:28; Acts 2:27; Rev 6:9; compare Rom 8:10; 2 Cor 5:8; 12:3).

Christian theology denies the dualism of Platonism and other forms of Greek philosophy that taught the body was a prison from which to escape. While it warns of the desires of the body becoming problematic or distorted, Christian writings do not teach that the body in itself is evil. New Testament passages Rom 12 and 1 Cor 12 employ the body as a metaphor for the ideal of harmonious unity in the church.¹

So, when we speak of ourselves as souls, we are speaking of our whole being, our entire self. And the question before us is this: Just how solid is our soul?

Souls made in the image of God

In the very first chapter of Genesis, the Bible seeks to shape our understanding of God and of ourselves. We are told that there is a God who created everything and pronounced it good. We are told that God created humans in his own image, setting them apart from the rest of God’s creation. Indeed, one of the most remarkable claims that Christians make is that we and **all** humans are made in the image or likeness of God. To use the old Latin phrase, we are the *imago dei*.

¹ Dennis Durst, *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, 2016.

But what does this really mean? Certainly, it doesn't mean that we look like God, for God has no physical body. Rather, there are a couple of truths that are proclaimed here.

First, God is sovereign over his creation and as the sovereign, God has appointed humanity to exercise wise and caring dominion over what God has created. It is a bit like seeing each of us an outpost for God, charged with responsibilities over all that God has entrusted to us. Ancient kings would erect statues of themselves in the far-flung reaches of their empires connoting the extent of their rule. So, we are images of God reflecting that God rules and that we have been given authority and responsibility to rule on God's behalf -- wisely and as good stewards of what has been entrusted to us.

Second, to proclaim that humans are the *imago dei* is to proclaim that just as God is inherently relational, so are we. God is unity in three persons; we are created in the plural, male and female (v. 27). Humans are marked out from the rest of creation. Every single human life is to be cherished and protected, accorded dignity and respect. Every person on the planet is made in God's image -- the people we love and the people we hate, those we admire and those we despise. We should never be surprised that the two greatest teachings of God are that we must love God and love others -- all others.

What is a beatitude?

The Sermon on the Mount is not the only place we find beatitudes in the Bible. For example, Psalm 1 begins "Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked." This is a beatitude. Many more are in Revelation: 1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7; and 22:14!!

A beatitude is written so as to be a declarative statement of fact. It is not an opinion. It is not a command. (You English majors will know that a beatitude is written in the indicative mood!)

The first word of each beatitude in the Bible seems to pose a problem for translators. In Greek, the word is *makarios*. In the secular Greek world, it meant simply "happy" or "fortunate." At times you find it translated this way, such as Psalm 1:1 in the NRSV. But in the religious context, "happy" is not the best choice; "blessed" is better, such as the NRSV translators used in Matthew.

This matters because a beatitude is centered on what God does, not some feeling on our part. It is God who blesses. The opposite of "blessed" is not "unhappy," it is "cursed." Our happiness comes from the many blessings God bestows upon us.

Further, from the creation account in Genesis 2, we learn that we were made from the dust of the earth, from flesh and bone, all of which speaks to the goodness of God's material world. We were made from the stuff of this world and are part of it, not merely spiritual beings trapped in the wrong place. And more remarkable yet, God made us only a little less than divine (Psalm 8:4). So we cannot be surprised by scenes such as Revelation 20 above, where we souls reign with Christ in God's kingdom. This is a theme that carries through the Bible from beginning to end. The question always is what such a kingdom looks like and how we are to rule. So let's turn to the Sermon on the Mount.

The Beatitudes

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is not a new and more stringent system of rules nor is it an impossible ideal. Rather, when Jesus sits down to teach his followers, he is training them in the Kingdom of God. These nine beatitudes, with which Jesus begins his teaching, are not simply an introduction to what follows -- they are its very foundation. These are not "entrance requirements" to God's Kingdom. They are not conditional -- none of them say "if you will x, then y." These are straightforward declarative statements of what is. Indeed, Eugene Boring goes further.² He notes that the Beatitudes do not merely declare what the Kingdom is; they bring it into being -- much like an umpire crying out "strike" or a minister pronouncing a couple

²from Eugene Boring's excellent commentary on Matthew's Gospel in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Abingdon, 1995. Another excellent and readable commentary is by Douglas Hare in the *Interpretation* series.

man and wife. The Beatitudes are Gospel – they proclaim to the world the Good News. Because these are prophetic pronouncements, they point us toward the teacher. They are not self-evident. It is Jesus’ authority that makes the Beatitudes the foundation of the Sermon.

The Kingdom of Heaven

Each of the nine Beatitudes points us to God’s Kingdom (the Kingdom of Heaven in Matthew). They either mention the kingdom directly (the first and eighth Beatitude) or to some aspect of it. In the kingdom of God, God’s people will be comforted and filled and shown mercy. They will inherit the earth. They will be rewarded in heaven. They will be called the children of God. They will see God!³ All the rest of the Sermon on the Mount has to be read in this bright light.

For whom is the Kingdom of Heaven?

The kingdom of heaven is for the people of God. The people of God are those who place their faith in Jesus Christ, in God. Those who have faith in Jesus strive to be ever-truer disciples. Those who are disciples of Christ strive to be Christ-like, much as an apprentice strives to be like the master. In the Beatitudes, Jesus teaches about his followers about the characteristics of disciples. Again, this is about training for the kingdom. Here are some thoughts on each Beatitude.

- Those who are “poor in spirit” are those who know that they are dependent on God. As Boring puts it: “Persons who are pronounced blessed are not those who claim a robust ego and strong sense of self-worth, but those whose only identity and security is in God.”
- “Those who mourn” doesn’t refer only to the death of loved ones, but also to our lament for the condition of God’s creation and his people. In other words, those who strive for the kingdom of God realize how far short of God’s hope the present world falls.
- Like “poor in spirit,” meekness (meaning gentleness and humility) flies in the face of conventional wisdom about what it takes to be “successful.” Of course, Jesus also challenges us to reconsider what we mean by success. (see Psalm 37:9,11 also).
- “Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” are those who long for the coming of God’s kingdom and the vindication of right. At the same time we need to understand that Jesus brings comfort to those who are quite literally poor, hungry, and thirsty.
- Matthew chooses a Greek word for “mercy” that is not merely about having compassion for others – the merciful are those who *act* on their compassion.
- In v. 8, purity of heart goes beyond the avoidance of impure thoughts to a single-minded devotion to God.
- Many of Jesus’ followers expected him to call for the overthrow of the Roman oppressors, by force if necessary. But Jesus disappoints them. The people of the kingdom are people of peace. In God’s kingdom, swords are broken into plowshares.

Jesus knows that to the extent that his training of his disciples moves them toward “Christ-likeness,” they will be increasingly out of step with the world around them. They will be reviled and persecuted as they shape their lives around the values of the

³In Revelation 22:4, God’s people see his face. Compare this with Exodus 33:20 where God warns Moses that he cannot see God’s face and live. We don’t need to get too literal here. God doesn’t have a face like you or I do. But just reflect for awhile on this imagery and the promise that we will see God as Adam once did, when, in the evenings, God would come and walk in the garden with his children. The significance and comfort of what the biblical writers are trying to tell us ought to take our breath away!

kingdom. Jesus pronounces blessing on them and on their prophetic mission . . . our mission . . . to be the light to the world . . . to be Solid Souls.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

A study of 1 Peter

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

A study of Ezra & Nehemiah

Meeting on-line at 12:00 noon Tuesday on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like, wear your pj's.-- we're on-line now so who'd even know. Have a Bible handy.

Both classes are now recorded and are available each week in my new podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts. Search by my name, "Scott Engle".

Scott's Sunday Class

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

The current series: *Indiana Jones and the Lost Images of God*.

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle."

These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.