

The Saving and Losing of a Soul

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The Saving and Losing of a Soul

Our subject on this occasion is the salvation and the losing of the soul as it is taught to us by the apostle Peter in his First Epistle. One of the lovely things about Peter is that when he writes, he doesn't mind taking us back to many of the unfortunate mistakes he himself made when the Lord Jesus was here on earth. From time to time, as Peter listened to the Lord, he felt sure the Lord had got it wrong and could do with a little help to correct things. Some of the suggestions he made were most unfortunate and inappropriate; he had to be corrected and learn lessons that he sometimes found very difficult.

When he comes to teach those lessons to us, he doesn't mind referring us to the time when he was in school, so to speak, and made all the mistakes. Now he's the teacher and we're in his school. If we find it difficult to understand what he says, be sure Peter will be sympathetic.

So on this topic of the salvation and the losing of the soul, we'll go first to school, where Peter was taught the lesson. Then we shall read the lesson from Peter himself. Peter has just confessed the Lord Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God, and a blessing has been pronounced on him by the Lord Jesus for that confession.

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.' But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.' Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?' (Matt 16:21-26)

At this point we need to pause for a little lesson in Greek. Don't be alarmed, it won't be long or difficult! The word in these verses which is translated *life* is the Greek word *psyche*. You're all aware of the word because it forms part of some English words such as psychology or psychiatrist. The word in Greek has many different connotations; you can translate it *life* or you can translate it *soul*. In this passage we meet it several times with each of these meanings. So the Lord is in effect saying, 'Whoever will save his psyche—his life, if you like—his soul, will lose it, and whoever loses his psyche, his life, or his soul, for my sake, will find it. For

what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his psyche, his life, or his soul, or what shall a man give in return for his psyche, his life, or his soul?

'Well,' you say, 'Do tell us which it is: don't leave us not being sure what it means.' We'll talk about that later, but just to point out that this is where Peter himself first heard the lesson being taught. It was after one of his grievous mistakes, for which our Lord had to rebuke him and say, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.'

So now let's turn to Peter's first epistle, and here is Peter, having learned his lesson, writing to teach us the implications.

That the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold that perishes, though it is proved by fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ: Whom having not seen, you love; on whom, though now you see him not, yet believing, you rejoice greatly with joy unspeakable and full of glory: Receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls. (1 Pet 1:7-9 RV)

Once more it's that same Greek word *psyche*; we find it again later in this chapter and in chapter 2:

Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for 'All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever'. (1:22-25)

Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. . . . For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. (2:11, 25)

The word is *psyche* in each case. So Peter has learned his lesson, and it's no wonder that when he comes to write his epistles he, more than anybody else in the epistles of the New Testament, talks to us about the salvation of our souls and what it means to lose them.

Paul's great emphasis is on justification by faith. Let us pause and enjoy it in our hearts:

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. (Rom 5:1)

I hope we have got hold of that, because being justified by faith we can rejoice in the certain expectation of obtaining the glory of God and one day being made like the Saviour. We can be sure of it here and now:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. (Rom 8:1)

Paul talks to us about justification by faith and about sanctification, but, as far as I'm aware, nowhere in his epistles does he use the phrase *the salvation of the soul*. And the beloved apostle John talks to us about eternal life and how we can be absolutely sure we have eternal life:

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life. (1 John 5:13)

And with it, he talks about the security of being in the Saviour's hand and in the Father's hand, with the assurance that he shall never let us go (see John 10:28–30). We shall never perish. I hope we've grasped that too—eternal life and all its wonderful assurance! But in his epistles, John nowhere uses the term *the salvation of the soul*. James uses it once. Hebrews uses it once. But it is Peter, predominantly and pre-eminently, who talks to us about the salvation of the soul, and it all goes back to the lesson he learned, personally, from our Lord Jesus Christ.

So we have to ask what this word *soul* means. Here comes the easy bit. This is a lesson in Greek, and Greek is like English! If you know English you realise that some English words mean a lot of things. You have to know the context in which to use them and, from the context, you know what they mean. Take the word *court* for instance. What does it mean? You say that means a police court. Well, then you hear on the sports news or something: 'The players are now coming out on to the court.' What kind of a court would that be? A police court? 'No, no,' you say, 'That means a tennis court.' And then you read somewhere else, 'Her Majesty the Queen holds court every Thursday.' What? Tennis court, or law court? In that context, court means a royal court. And when you hear that somebody is *courting* somebody else, what does that mean? Playing tennis with them, or summoning them to the police court? You say, 'That's all getting very difficult.' Well, it's your language, I didn't invent it and you seem to know how to use it and get the words straight in the proper contexts! So why should we complain about Greek, if one of its words means quite a lot of things in different places? When Peter talks to us about the salvation of the soul, what does he mean by *soul*? Have you got a soul? I suspect most of us here would claim to have a soul, so we ought to know what it is.

This Greek word *psyche* means, in the first place, one's physical life. For instance, we are told in Matthew 2 that, when Joseph and Mary brought the young boy Jesus back from Egypt, an angel told them that they were now free to come back, so long as they went up north, because those who sought the young child's *psyche* were now dead. When Herod sought the *psyche* of Jesus, what was he seeking for? He wasn't interested in spiritual welfare: he was seeking the child's physical life and determined to destroy it. So the word can mean that in the New Testament. And our Lord's warning still stands. Suppose you were faced with the offer of eternal life, the forgiveness of sins and justification and a home in heaven, but you knew if you received the gospel and received the Saviour you would be persecuted and you could lose your physical life. What would you decide to do? Keep your physical life and refuse the Saviour? Or receive the Saviour and if need be forfeit your physical life?

I expect none of us have had to face that question. But there are multitudes on earth to this present day that are faced with precisely that problem. They accept the Saviour and run

the risk, the very real risk, of losing their physical life; or to keep their physical life they refuse to receive the Saviour. And in that circumstance our Lord's words remain: he that loves his life, his physical life, shall lose it. He that loses it for my sake and the gospel's shall keep it to life eternal (see Mark 8:35). Pondering that makes me think how easily I got salvation. What would I have done if I had had to face that decision? I shall be in glory, I suspect, before most of you, but there's no guaranteeing that you won't have to face a similar decision one of these days.

As well as meaning physical life, soul can mean our eternal, spiritual life. So John, in his third letter, writes to his friend Gaius, wishing that 'all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, as it goes well with your soul' (3 John 1:2). So John is contrasting the physical health of his friend's body with the spiritual health of his inner man, his soul. That shows how we've got to keep our eyes open when we're reading and see what this word soul, *psyche* means in its context. It can refer to the inner man.

I suspect we shall all agree that in the New Testament this word for soul, *psyche*, often refers to that part of a human being that survives death. Said our Lord Jesus to his disciples,

Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul [*psyche*]. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul [*psyche*] and body in hell. (Matt 10:28)

There's a very big difference, isn't there? You can kill the body, but that isn't the end of the soul. The soul is that part which survives death. Remember about the Lord Jesus when he was dying, suffering on Calvary, and the robber, the terrorist man beside him, repented and trusted the Saviour. Our Lord replied to him, 'Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise' (Luke 23:43). Well that day our Lord's body was in the grave and remained there all the rest of Friday, Saturday and until early Sunday morning. His body was in the grave, but where was his soul? And where was the soul of the dying thief? Our Lord tells us that it wasn't in the grave and it hadn't been destroyed. It was in paradise with the Lord Jesus.

The soul is that part of a man or woman that can survive death, and if the person concerned is a believer, what a lovely thing that is, for the soul is the real person that inhabits the body. So when you listen to the early Christians talking about death, they don't normally say, 'Now my soul is about to depart and go to be with Christ,' though you could put it that way. They talked rather like Paul, 'I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account' (Phil 1:23-24). His own personal desire was to depart—that is, from this world, from his body—and to be with Christ. Not just his soul to be there, but he himself would be with Christ. And so for the dying thief, 'Today you (not your soul but you) will be with me in Paradise.' And so Paul says, 'We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord . . . and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord' (2 Cor 5:6-8).

The soul is the real person that inhabits the body. If we've established that that's what the soul is, now let me enquire of you about this soul of yours, which you say is 'saved'. It's what the evangelists say, and rightly so. For when the evangelists preach to us they have in mind our souls, that part of us that's going to last eternally somewhere. They're liable to say, 'If you die tonight, where would your soul be?' In other words, 'Where would *you* be?' That

is a very serious question to face, isn't it? 'Is your soul saved?' says the evangelist. And they rightly tell us that when we trust the Saviour, then our soul is indeed saved. We commit the keeping of our soul to our blessed Lord. There are no uncertainties about that.

But now that you've grasped what this soul of yours is, I am tempted to ask, where do you keep it? You say your soul is saved, where do you keep it? Do you keep it in a box, so that when the Lord comes you say, 'Half a minute Lord, I just want to go and collect my soul. When you saved my soul I put it in a box and put it in the bank vault so that it would never get lost. I just want to run down to the bank and collect my soul.' 'No,' you say. 'Don't be so silly. My soul is *me*.' That's right. And who are you? And what are you? Because when we read the New Testament we find that this word *soul* covers a lot of things that we are—what our soul is.

It's a life, of course. And because it is a life, it has a time trajectory. I was going to ask how old you are, but I mustn't ask that! But how many years is it since your soul has been saved? You say, 'Sixty-nine and a half.' And your soul has been alive all that time? 'Yes, of course,' you say. 'It's my life. It's me.' Well, I'll tell you a thing about life; I wonder if you've noticed it. You have a physical life and a soul life, but when we think of our lives and the time of our lives and how long they last, then we remember we have to spend our lives. That's the thing about life, that's the thing about souls. You can't put them in a box. The soul is a life; it's alive and you have to spend it. You keep the soul, but you also have to spend it. You spend the time, and that's an element in the soul.

And then the word can also be used of our love. We are to love the Lord our God with all our mind, heart, *soul* and strength. Let me ask you a question. Is your love part of you? Does your soul have any love? 'Yes,' you say, 'of course.' That's part of you as well isn't it? Part of your redeemed soul is its power to love. But you can't keep your love in a box; you have to spend your love on something. You can't keep it and it's important what you spend it on.

It's the same with our energies. We have a phrase in English, 'I put my heart and soul into it.' So it also implies your energies and your ambitions and your willpower. And it is used of our mind—'with one mind (*psyche*) striving side by side for the faith of the gospel' (Phil 1:27). It's used too for appetites—'For he satisfies the longing soul, and the hungry soul he fills with good things' (Ps 107:9). The soul is that part of us that has an appetite and can be satisfied. Our soul carries our emotions. Remember what the Lord Jesus said at the Last Supper? 'My soul is very sorrowful, even to death' (Matt 26:38).

So, when we think of all those things, we come back to what Peter is talking about—the salvation of our souls. And then we remember how he learned his lesson and what the mistake was. He confessed Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of the living God; and then, to his astonishment, our Lord began to tell the disciples he must go to Jerusalem and be rejected by the chief priests and scribes and be crucified, but he would rise again the third day. And, listening to that, Peter couldn't make sense of it. 'I've just confessed him to be the Son of God, the Messiah. What is he talking about, he's going to go to Jerusalem and be killed? Of course not, Lord,' he said. 'You mustn't get that kind of idea into your head. No, you must tell yourself, "I'm going to Jerusalem and being successful." You mustn't think these negative thoughts.'

You can understand why Peter felt that way. When he first heard the Lord's call, he had come to the Lord and received the Saviour and, as we put it, he had been saved. His soul was saved, if you like. But since then, think of the love he had bestowed on the Saviour and all he had given to the Saviour because he loved him. And think of all the energy he'd spent on the Saviour, following him around Galilee and elsewhere, preaching for him and attending to his physical needs, rowing him in the boat. He'd given up his own job to follow the Saviour; and all the energy and love he had, he spent on Christ. But now, if Christ were going to be killed and rejected and the world refused to accept him as Messiah, all that Peter had spent on him would be going down the drain. It would be lost. So Peter said, 'No, Lord. No! You must think that you're going to be successful. They'll all own you as king and Messiah; and when they own you as king I shall sit on the right hand, not James and John, those other two upstarts. I shall be sitting on the right hand, or on the left.' A big mistake, wasn't it? But you can understand him. Have you ever done anything for the Lord that has really cost you hard—time, talents, energy, hope, love, ambition? To think it's all gone down the drain would be a bitter pill, wouldn't it? But our Lord had to warn Peter and his companions: 'You see, Peter, you don't want to lose this time and everything you've invested in me. But unless you're careful, Peter, in wanting to keep your life you could lose it—in wanting to keep your *soul* you could lose it.' Peter must have found that a very difficult conundrum to follow. Why is it that to keep your life, your soul, you have to lose it?

So our Lord taught him an object lesson. About eight days afterwards he took Peter, James and John up the mountain to give them a vision, as Matthew calls it. In this vision, they saw the Lord Jesus in the glory of his Father, his face shining like the sun, and with him stood Moses and Elijah (Matt 17:1–8). With what surprise did they see it! I wonder did John nudge Peter and say, 'There's another world up here, Peter.'

Yes, there are two worlds, aren't there? There are two ages. There's this present age that in general has rejected the Lord Jesus, and there's the coming age when he shall come in the glory of his Father and the holy angels. Now Peter's brain was beginning to work. As he stood there thinking there came a cloud which Peter instinctively recognised and so did the other apostles. This was the cloud of the Shekinah glory of God. They were afraid when they entered the cloud, as they heard the actual voice of almighty God speaking to them. The voice was saying, 'This is my beloved Son. You listen to him.'

Ah, that's different from what they were saying 'downstairs'. There the Pharisees are saying, 'Now Peter, be sensible. If you believe and trust this Jesus and you spend your very soul on him, let's tell you now, we don't like him and as soon as we can we're going to execute him. It could well be, Peter, that when we execute him, we might execute you as well. But even if we don't, when we've executed him, all that you've given him—your life, your time, your wealth, your energies, your ambitions—all will have been lost, gone down the drain. Don't listen to him.'

The voice up here was saying, 'Peter, this is my beloved Son; do listen to him.' We have to make up our minds which age are we going to live for—this present world or that eternal world. Of course we've got to live here and spend our time and energies doing our daily work, looking after our families and so forth, but is that our ultimate ambition? For which

world do we spend our lives? For this one, or so as to make them count for that other world of glory? That is the question.

And when we come to Peter, we hear him talking in those terms. 'Let me talk to you,' says Peter, 'about your love'. That's part of your soul. They have believed the gospel. When they put their faith in Christ, the Holy Spirit cleansed their hearts, their souls, by faith. 'Well now,' says Peter, 'what are you going to do with your love? You've got to spend it, but what will you spend your love on? If I were you,' says Peter, 'having purified your souls by obeying the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart.' In other words, one prior claim on our love is our fellow believers. Love one another, since you have purified your soul.

Do you think I am hearing straight, when I think I hear some of those early Christians saying, under their breath, 'Ah, Peter, do you happen to know my brothers and sisters? They're nice souls, but they're not quite so colourful as some of the companions I meet out in the world. They are very ingenious and forward moving and attractive. My fellow Christians, not to be unkind, are nice folks but not so colourful.' What do you think Peter would say to them? 'You can love the world if you must, but do notice this, "All flesh is like grass, and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers and the flower falls."'

If you love this world, in that sense of the word 'world', and you spend your love on it, your love will go down the drain because the world is fading and one day will be gone. Why should we love our brothers and sisters? 'Because,' says Peter, 'they have been born again of imperishable seed, through the living and abiding word of God. Spend your love on them, whatever you do. They're going to last and every bit of love you've given them and invested in them, by way of service or encouragement or whatever, will abide eternally and you will see the profit on your investment of love in your fellow believers.' That's an important lesson, isn't it?

Then Peter says, 'Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against the soul.' You know the story in the Old Testament, that when God delivered the Israelites out of Canaan and they began to march towards their inheritance, flowing with milk and honey, Amalek came with all his forces and fought against them. Old pharaoh had tried to get them back into Egypt but he failed. Amalek thought he had a bigger prospect. He would stop them making any progress and he came to war against them. 'The passions of the flesh,' says Paul, 'wage war against the soul. As you pilgrims and exiles are on your way to glory, these fleshly desires will wage a campaign against you, to stop your progress. So don't conform yourselves to your former desires and your ignorance,' says Paul. 'Watch your soul.'

Who exactly were these Israelites? You read about them in Numbers 11 and 14. They came out of Egypt and there they were, foot slogging along the desert because there was a great inheritance out there, flowing with milk and honey. But after a while the going got a bit tough. The sand got hot during the daytime; there wasn't too much water about, and they felt a bit thirsty and began to think of all the onions and cucumbers and garlic that they ate in Egypt. Then their mouths (appetites) began to long for those onions and garlic and cucumbers and things, so they came to Moses and they nearly stoned him. They started weeping over cucumbers. 'We remember what we had in Egypt and we ate it for nothing.'

What a lot of nonsense that was. Nothing? They got it by being slaves! 'We remember the cucumbers and things. Now there's nothing but this dry old manna stuff,' and they all wept. What a sorry sight. I try to imagine it sometimes—600,000 grown men weeping their eyes out over cucumbers. And you say, 'Grown men? If they were children that would be one thing, but grown men?' They can't work it out in their heads that they have a glorious inheritance ahead and, for the time being, the road may be a bit tough. They haven't the sense to judge the one thing by the other and be prepared to endure the toughness now because they're going to the glory beyond.

And how about us? Says Peter, 'You're travelling to "an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you . . . In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials"' (1:4, 6). Can't we see the proportion of things? It's worth enduring a little discomfort that's unavoidable on a journey that is taking us to the imperishable inheritance above.

We might talk about all those other things that we spend our souls on. Our love, our energies, our ambitions, our desires are all part of our souls and we're spending them on this, that and the other. God give us the wisdom to spend our souls on the things that will repay eternal dividends and not to spend them on things that will soon fade and be gone forever. There are two things to help us as we go along. 'Keep your eyes,' says Peter, 'on the revelation of our Lord Jesus who, though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls' (see 1:8–9). Peter is giving us advice that he learned in the school of Christ. What helped him to face this lesson about the saving and the losing of the soul? It was when the Saviour took him up the mountain and showed him the glory.

What shall it be like when the Saviour comes? 'Oh,' says Peter, 'do fix your eyes on that glorious time when the Saviour shall be revealed and you actually see the glory. And as you see in your hearts and minds the glory that shall be when you set eyes on the Saviour, it shall help you and cause you to receive in a practical way the saving of your souls.' Notice the present participle, 'receiving'. Day by day receiving the end of your faith, the salvation of your soul.

Then Peter adds another thing, 'You surely realise, don't you, my fellow believers, what was involved in conversion? You became the Lord's sheep.' Now we all know that sheep have no sense in their little heads how to develop their potential to the full. They get lost and they get ill and their fleeces get all muddled up with thorns and thistles, and goodness knows what, and they become bedraggled. You're like that! Your soul—its loves, its hopes, its energies—goes astray. 'For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls' (2:25). That's what conversion is. He died to save us, he's given us eternal security. We're justified by faith, but he stands beside us because, by their very nature, we have to keep spending our souls.

What shall I spend my soul on? What shall I do in this decision and that decision? All sorts of questions arise that have to be answered. The wonderful thing is that our blessed Lord stands by our side and he watches how we spend our souls. We have to do the deciding but he's there to direct. He'll say, 'Yes, that's a good thing to spend your soul on, but this

wouldn't be good—you'd waste your soul if you spent it on that. Don't do that.' It's like a mother standing with a little infant in a toy shop, and these wicked toy manufacturers have put this highly coloured motor thing in front of him to get the infant's attention. All colourful and marvellous it looks and the infant only gets sight of it and he says, 'I must have that, Mum. I want this one, I want this one!' And Mum says, 'Well, you've got your £50 that Uncle Jack gave you, and you have to decide whether you spend it on this thing here or something else, but I shouldn't spend it on this if I were you.' The mother can see that the thing is flimsy old plastic stuff, and the child only has to sit on it too hard one day and the whole thing will break and be gone. So she says, 'No, I wouldn't spend it on that if I were you, darling. See that thing over there?' It's sturdily built and will last the child for many years. He'll even pass it on to his grandchildren! It's painted a little bit too dull a brown but Mum says, 'I should spend it on that if I were you.' The child isn't quite so sure. He hasn't yet got it into his head what is going to last and what is worth spending his £50 on.

So does the blessed Lord stand by our side, Sunday to Saturday, in all life's decisions. We don't have to run away from life. But as we spend our lives, our souls—our energies, time, love, hopes, ambitions and emotions—the Lord is there to say, 'Now my dear, don't spend it on that, it's not going to last you know. You'll lose everything you invest in that; spend it on this and what you spend will last for all eternity.' May the Lord help us to understand these things and their practical implications so that we may live for him and his coming kingdom.

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. His international teaching ministry is marked by fresh and careful expositions of both testaments. He has published scholarly studies on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John 13–17, Acts, Hebrews and the New Testament's use of the Old Testament.