

Bodies and Souls

A Sermon on Ecclesiastes 3:18-21; Job 19:25-27; 2 Corinthians 5:1-10, and Matthew 10:24-31

When I was eighteen, my Dad began dating the woman with whom he would spend most of the remainder of his life. Six months into their relationship, her eldest son died when he was hit by a car. At the funeral his body was placed in an open casket. I remember my Dad telling me how helpful he found this. ‘You could see that his soul wasn’t there anymore,’ he said to me, ‘*He* wasn’t there.’

Our sermon this morning is about bodies and souls. We’ll be asking questions such as these: What is the mind? Is it the same thing as the soul? How is mind related to the functioning of the brain? How do bodies and minds interact more generally? What happens to the soul, or mind, at death? Does the soul perish along with the body, or does the soul survive the death of the body? Is belief in the soul’s immortality biblical? How does it sit alongside the great Bible doctrine of the resurrection of the dead? Our fundamental question is this: Of what does the human being most basically consist? A body and a soul? Or just a body?

Today’s topic is a strange one for two reasons, I think. In the first place, it will feel at times quite abstract, and disconcertingly removed from the central concerns of the biblical writers themselves. And it’s certainly true that working out what the Bible teaches concerning the soul generally involves drawing out what a particular passage implies or assumes, rather than being able simply to ‘read off’ an author’s understanding of the soul straight from the passage itself, as it were. And yet, the question of souls is intimately bound up with one of life’s deepest experiences: sitting at the deathbed of someone you love and thinking, ‘Where did they go?’ In the second place, reading about how Christians have conceptualised the soul over the centuries is to be confronted with the fact that Christians who have exactly the same understanding of the gospel – that is, those truths central to who Jesus is and what he came to do – can and have in fact believed wildly different things about the basic component parts of the human being.

This morning we're going to begin, somewhat counterintuitively, *not* with the Bible, but with the understanding of the soul as it developed in Ancient Greece, focussing in on the soul as it is described in Plato's *Phaedo* and Aristotle's *On the Soul*. We're then going to turn to the Bible passages we've just had read for us, and ask, 'What do these passages imply or assume regarding the nature of the soul and how it relates to the body?' We'll then look at Gregory of Nyssa's dialogue *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, to see how one early Christian sought to think through this topic both biblically and in dialogue with the intellectual culture of his own day. We're then going to finish by jumping forward into the twentieth-century and asking whether advances in neurobiology have made belief in the soul redundant, and how Christians today might like to integrate biblical views about the human being with recent developments in brain science. Let's dive in!—

PART ONE

The Nature of the Soul in Plato and Aristotle

The first thing to say here is that the Ancient Greeks produced many different theories about the human person. The reason we're focussing in on Plato and Aristotle is simply because of the preponderant influence they exerted and continue to exert on Christian thinking about the nature of mind and body.

Plato's *Phaedo* is a dialogue set during the final hours in the life of Socrates, Plato's teacher. In the *Phaedo* Plato revisits Socrates' last conversation with friends prior to drinking the hemlock that would kill him. Plato shows Socrates consoling his friends by teaching them about the immortality of the soul. For Socrates, the body is the soul's outer garment. The soul belongs to eternity; it lives in the body as in a prison. Death is to be welcomed as a friend.

Aristotle's conception of the soul is quite different. For Aristotle, the pupil of Plato and teacher of Alexander the Great, the soul provides the form of the body. It is an ordering principle, giving shape to the raw matter of which our bodies consist. The body exists for the sake of the soul, but souls are also dependent upon bodies for gathering the information they need to direct the body toward proper flourishing. If for Plato, the real 'you' is your soul, for Aristotle, the true self is best thought of as a composite of soul and body.

PART TWO

Soul and Body in the Bible

We come now to this morning's readings, asking the same question we asked of Plato and Aristotle, namely: Of what does the human person consist? Our first passage comes from Ecclesiastes. The Preacher, mostly likely picking up on the language of Genesis 1 to 3, thinks of human beings as bodies shaped from the dust, into which God breathes life. As in Psalm 104, when God withdraws his breath, or Spirit, they die and return to the dust from which they came. The Teacher's position is not that the human being is annihilated on death. Rather, he expresses uncertainty as to the ultimate resting place of the human spirit which survives the death of its body: does it go down into the earth, or does it rise upward? Nonetheless, death is far from being pictured as a release from the prison-house of the body, as in Plato: rather, it reinforces our similarity to the animals and humbles us under the judgement of God.

The passage from Job seems to push in a different direction. Here Job appears to expect something like a resurrection body in which he will see God, who will vindicate him against the false accusations of his friends 'in the end.' To borrow a phrase from N. T. Wright, he looks forward to 'a life *after* life after death.' There are, however, two significant problems with this interpretation. The first is that this picture runs counter to the teaching of the rest of the book, in which Job thinks of his post-mortem existence in Sheol as a state in which he will finally be free of the persecuting wrath of God which he experiences in his present, fleshly body. The second problem is that these verses present multiple difficulties for the translator, which is why modern Bibles are thick with footnotes at vv. 25 and 26.

Typically, biblical scholars date the emergence of a strong hope for personal resurrection to the very end of the Old Testament period, achieving dominance only in the Apocryphal and Pseudepigraphic literature written between the close of the Old Testament canon and the writing of the New. Nonetheless, it's important to see that, even in the absence of a strong resurrection hope, Old Testament beliefs about life after death presuppose a form of mind-body dualism. But notice the contrast with Plato! Death might be considered a release for someone like Job, whose body is wracked with suffering, but in general body and soul are meant to go together. It's an impoverished self that survives the death of the body in Sheol. Death enters the world as a result of sin and, far from being perceived as a friend, is thought of as humanity's great enemy.

Turning to the New Testament, we see at once that a great change has come over what God's people expect to have happen to them after their death. In common with most first-century Judaism, the writers of the New Testament look forward to a general resurrection of all people at the end of the age, in which the souls of those who have died will be reunited with their bodies. The righteous will live an embodied life with God, while the wicked will suffer punishment, again in the body, for what they have done during their life on earth. This is the picture presupposed by Jesus' parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man, a picture he and his listeners would have held in common. The second, and major difference, between the writers of the New Testament and those of the Old is of course their conviction that Jesus Christ has already been raised from the dead as the 'firstfruits' of the general resurrection to come. This means that, in contrast to the worldview implicit in Ecclesiastes and Job, Sheol is no longer thought of simply as the place under the earth where the souls of the dead live out a shadowy existence after the decay of their earthly bodies, but is instead thought of as a place where souls await the resurrection of their bodies. And as in the Hades of the Greeks, the Hebrew Sheol is given a more elaborate geography: the righteous dead dwell in the bosom of Abraham, as Jesus puts it in his parable, while the wicked dead experience—even as they await reunion with their recreated bodies—a foretaste of the suffering that is to come.

This is the worldview that underlies the first of our New Testament readings. 'For we know,' writes Paul,

that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and our burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up in life.

The 'earthly tent' referred to by Paul is his physical, mortal body. The body encloses Paul's soul, much as a tent encases the hiker who spends the night deep in the woods. Just as a tent will eventually show signs of wear and tear, so the human body gradually comes apart. The 'eternal house in heaven' is Paul's resurrection body. When we die we take off our mortal body much as we might strip off our clothes at the end of the day, but this 'nakedness', or 'bodilessness', of the soul is, in contrast to Platonism, an undesirable state of affairs. And this is in part what makes the prospect of death so terrible: our souls are meant to be housed in bodies; being without a body is unnatural. So the focus of Paul's hope is for his 'heavenly dwelling', his resurrection

body, with which he expects his soul to be clothed at the end of the age. (You'll note that the key interpretative move I've made here is to say that Paul's 'heavenly dwelling' is the resurrection body he expects to receive from God at the end of the age: Paul speaks of it as already existing in heaven as a way of emphasising its indestructability and the certainty of his receiving it on the Last Day, not because he expects to jump into it seamlessly at the moment of his death. This isn't the only way of understanding these verses, but it's the one that I think makes most sense within the overall sweep of Paul's teaching concerning the resurrection in 1 and 2 Corinthians.)

But what of the interval of time that will elapse between Paul's death and his receipt of a resurrection body at the end of age, the 'nakedness' that he speaks of in 2 Corinthians 5? Elsewhere in his letters Paul develops two pictures that speak to this state. On the one hand, he can describe it, as he does in 1 Thessalonians as 'sleep'. On the other hand, he can talk of it as 'being with the Lord', as he does in Philippians. My own view is that Paul uses the language of sleep metaphorically to emphasise the fact that the death of the body is not the end of the story for Christians. Rather, just as we wake from sleep substantially the same as we were when we went to bed, so in the resurrection we will be recognisably ourselves, albeit the glory of our resurrection bodies will far outshine the splendour of the ones we have now. I then take much more literally the language of 'being with the Lord' from Philippians 1. At death our souls will dwell in heaven with Jesus. We will be conscious; we will be with God as we await the resurrection body that God will give us on the Last Day when Jesus returns to earth and the Last Judgement takes place.

This brings us quite naturally to the fourth of our readings for today, Jesus' instruction to his disciples not to be afraid 'of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul,' but rather to 'be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell.' Jesus has been warning his disciples that they will face heated opposition when announcing that the kingdom of heaven has come near. Again – just as in 2 Corinthians 5, where Paul is really teaching about the resurrection, and beliefs about the soul only surface implicitly as he unfolds his argument – Jesus is really teaching about the reality of final judgment and accountability to God against the backdrop of earthly persecution, but nonetheless, for our purposes it's worth asking the question: What view of the soul does Jesus' saying imply? Jesus seems to be in continuity with the rest of the Bible in saying that human beings consist of body and soul, and that the soul survives the death of the mortal body. What he adds is that the soul does not possess immortality of itself, but is able to be destroyed by God 'in hell' (this being one of those passages

in the New Testament that seem to picture hell, not as a place of everlasting torment, but as one of annihilation).

PART THREE

Body and Soul in Gregory of Nyssa

The question I now want to broach is this: What happens when a biblically literate Christian wants to set out his Christian beliefs about the soul in the context of a wider culture deeply indebted to the thinking of Plato and Aristotle? Happily we have just such an example of this in the person of the fourth century theologian, Gregory of Nyssa! At some point after the death of his brother, Basil, himself an important theologian, Gregory wrote a dialogue entitled *On the Soul and the Resurrection*. The dialogue begins with Gregory himself, laid low by the news of his brother's death, arriving at the house of their sister, Macrina, seeking consolation. As he approaches her, however, he notices that she, too, is mortally ill. The ensuing dialogue consists of a composed Macrina teaching a distraught Gregory about the nature of the soul and the resurrection hope of the Christian, much as Plato depicted the condemned Socrates consoling his friends on the eve of *his* death.

On the Soul and the Resurrection is a fascinating text, because in it we can see biblical passages being consciously brought into conversation with key Platonic and Aristotelian doctrines concerning the soul. Sometimes, as you would expect, a commitment to Scripture means explicitly repudiating part of the intellectual furniture of the surrounding culture. Gregory rejects Plato's belief in the transmigration of souls, or what we would call reincarnation, for example.

Sometimes an idea from Plato has captured Gregory's imagination, leading him, arguably, to accommodate the Christian faith to his surrounding culture in an illegitimate way. For example, there's a passage in Plato's *Phaedo* where Socrates speaks of the sorrow souls who have immersed themselves in worldly cares experience when they are separated from their bodies at death. Gregory develops this in a fascinating direction, arguing that God will use suffering to purify souls of their worldly attachments after death in what seems to be an anticipation of the mediaeval view of Purgatory. While this is not going to trouble Roman Catholic Christians, most Protestant Christians are going to find Gregory's position insufficiently grounded in Scripture and compromising of Jesus' finished nature of Jesus' sacrifice for our sins on the Cross. At yet other points, Gregory uses Greek concepts as tools with which to bring clarity and coherence to

isolated verses of the Bible that imply, rather than explicitly teach, something about the nature of the soul.

Gregory's dialogue *On the Soul and the Resurrection* will be inspiring for any Christian who thinks it's important to integrate her faith with everything else she holds to be true. It explains belief in the Resurrection for a pagan culture steeped in the language and ideas of Aristotle and Plato at the same time as showing contemporary Christians how to bring their faith into conversation with the best non-Christian thought in their surrounding culture.

PART FOUR

Body and Mind in the Context of Twentieth- and Twenty-First Century Neurobiology

We now come to the last part of this sermon, in which we'll be asking: Don't recent scientific advances in the understanding of the brain make belief in the soul redundant? If everything that used to be thought of as part of the soul can now be located in different parts of the brain, what consequences will that have for traditional language about the soul?

The first thing I need to do here is to say that I am way out of my area of expertise! I tapped out of science at the end of Year 10; I wouldn't recognise a neuron if I fell over it. And yet, neuroscience does shape the way I view, and even experience, the world. I give as an example of the latter the forty milligrams of fluoxetine I take every morning to inhibit my body's over-enthusiastic reabsorption of serotonin. This has very practical flow-on effects in my life! For example, this week I've had kids at home sick for two of the three days when I would normally be working. The me that doesn't take fluoxetine does not write a sermon this week; the me that does can. In my case, disabling anxiety about writing, a malady of the soul if ever there was one, turns out to have a distinctly physiological basis.

But even those of us who are less indebted to advances in neuroscience in their personal life have only to read through a book such as Oliver Sacks' *The Man who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* to see the intimate links between brain function and self-consciousness, or mind, which in this last section of today's sermon I'll be treating as basically equivalent to the word 'soul'. Sacks' book is full of moving depictions of men and women forced to reconstruct their sense of self in the wake of brain injuries. Bodies and souls turn out to be far more intimately intertwined than we might previously have thought. How might scientifically-trained Christians bring their scientific training into conversation with cherished Christian beliefs about the nature of the soul?

The first option might be to eschew belief in the soul altogether and become what is called a Christian physicalist, that is, someone who remains committed to the Gospel, but who thinks that the Christian faith can be articulated without recourse to belief in a non-material soul. Such a Christian will be able to point out that the basic New Testament hope for believers is the resurrection of the body, not the immortality of the soul. They will also point to the way both Old and New Testament writers think of mind and body far more holistically than they typically are in more Platonically-influenced Christian writing. Christian physicalists will, however, have more difficulty speaking of an intermediate state. One solution might be to say that the intermediate state forms part of the intellectual background to the New Testament writings in the same way that the three-storied universe forms part of the intellectual background to the Old Testament doctrine of Creation. Just as Christian believers have wished to retain the doctrine of creation while adopting a view of the earth as spherical (as, for example, can be seen in Gregory's work *On the Soul and the Resurrection*), so too can they distance themselves from belief in an intermediate state, which, after all, looms so much larger in the intertestamental literature than in the New Testament itself. A Christian physicalist might want to say that the Christian's mind is destroyed along with her body at death, but that God will recreate both at Jesus' return.

A second option would be to retain belief in the soul's survival of the body and in the intermediate state. This option will be attractive to Christians who think that the scattered biblical references to an intermediate state of souls awaiting their resurrection bodies amounts to something more than a culturally-bound background to biblical resurrection faith, and who think that going to be with Jesus while they await their resurrection bodies is itself an important part of the Christian hope. These people will acknowledge that while many, if not all, the activities we associate with mind appear to be enabled by the brain, the soul nonetheless is something distinct from the brain, and that God will maintain it after the death of our body so as to ensure that the self who inhabits our resurrection body is recognisably the same as the one that once dwelt in our earthly body.

There is also a third option, which is to view mind as an emergent property of the different functions of the brain as they develop through interaction with the surrounding world. Even though the soul, on this view, emerges purely out of the physical configuration of the brain, once it exists, it enjoys a relative independence from the body so as to be able to survive the destruction of the body at death. This option will be attractive for Christians who wish to pay more than lip service to the insights of contemporary neuroscience, but who also wish to uphold a traditional Christian understanding of the intermediate state. The drawback to this view is that

I think it will have difficulty in recognising a mind or self in people who fall outside the range of normal human development, such as children who die in their mother's womb, for example.

While working out which of these options is going to provide the best way forward, it's important to step back and to look at what the doctrine of the intermediate state is trying to protect. As far as I can see, over and above the obvious function of capturing and systematising the various allusions to it in the New Testament, the doctrine of the intermediate state is trying to ensure that the 'you' who will live forever with Christ at his return is in a meaningful way the same you that lives today in your mortal body, much as the doctrine of the resurrection *body* is designed to account for a meaningful continuity between your weak mortal body and the glorious, transformed body you will inhabit at Jesus' return. The basic argument of this sermon has been that resurrection of the body and immortality of the soul need not be seen as competing doctrines, but as mutually supportive ones, provided that the latter is shorn of a Platonic view of the body as something bad in itself. But more important still is the way that today's passages, and others like them, speak to God's faithfulness, not just to his creation as a whole, but to the individuals who form part of it, to you, and to me, now, and at the moment of our deaths, and forever. Amen.