

“Whom Do You Seek?
Isaiah 26:1-9; Acts 4:31-33; 1 Cor 1:21-24;
Matthew 11:28-30; John 1:37-39

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My soul desires God's presence. My soul yearns for God. Both of those are phrases out of Isaiah. As I look at those phrases they feel pretty poetic to me, and perhaps that's how we should take them—as poetic phrases. Yet, there is in them that yearning, that desiring that's going on. It seems like something pretty important. But what's yearning and desiring in that passage? It's his soul.

We started out this fall thinking about Jesus' commandment to love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength. We've been walking through those different elements of what Jesus said we could use. Today, we look at the idea of soul and its use in Isaiah and a couple of the other passages we heard this morning.

What does *soul* mean? It's not a phrase that I think we use very often. What does the word *soul* mean? I looked at some of the Old and New Testament passages that have been translated with *soul*, or where the word that is translated *soul* is used. In the Old Testament, oftentimes the word could be creature, or living creature. It made me wonder about what soul is.

I think one of the reasons it's so hard today to think about what a soul is is expressed in a book called *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain* by Antonio Damasio, 2011. According to this book, in the 19th Century, Thomas Huxley said that the mind is to brain as the whistle is to a steam train—a mere epiphenomenon. Even today, as a review of Damasio's book notes, “In everyday thought and speech we have reasons, intention, and feeling. In brain-speak, we have synapses, firing patterns, and neurotransmitters. For the mechanical materialist, the latter is the cause of the former.” What I'm saying is that it feels to me like I live in a world that doesn't have room for something we call soul, and I'm not sure, then, how to fit it all together.

Some of you may know that I went back to visit my mother this past week. On the way back I was flipping through the airport magazine and I saw all these ads for trips to spas and places that take care of your body, and good food. I didn't see a single one that said anything about the care of your soul. I think in today's world the common perception has left it out. And yet it feels to me like it's incredibly important. What is our soul? If we simply look at that Old Testament perspective, it's the thing that can be living. That, to me, is a very interesting thing—it's the thing that can be living. It's not just a body, but it's the whole of who we are. So what would you say? What is the soul?

John Calvin said in passing that soul is merely “the intellect and will.” That doesn't feel like it's quite full enough. In our Sunday evening book study, we've been reading the book *Anam Cara* by John O'Donohue, and he says that the soul is where the body

lives, rather than the body being the place the soul lives. That's an interesting thought. I'm not always sure what to make of what he says, but it's an interesting thought.

C. S. Lewis says it's not that we have a body and a soul, we just *are* a soul. It's interesting to me to begin to think about who we are. What is the self? What is that part of who we are that lives, that is able to think and feel? We can talk about thinking and feeling, but what does that? It feels to me like what scripture is talking about when it talks about soul is that the soul is the part that does the thinking and feeling. It's us, each one unique. The soul is the part of us that can live, that God gives life to, that makes us the unique individuals we are. I hate to even say that because it begins to sound too psychological. It's the essence of who we are, partly in terms of how we would say that I'm Norman and not somebody else. So there's a sense of individualism in it. We are each unique. We are each a unique soul, a living soul. In this world of materialism, it's a little hard to decide how to talk about something that's not material, and yet we know we have a consciousness, we know we think, we know we have feelings. What has those? Again, I would say it's our soul, our life.

As we think about that, what's important for me to recognize, as brought home in that very act of looking at that magazine, is that there's not much talk about how we care for our souls today. When you go to a workplace, do they say you have to be sure to take care of your soul today? When is the last time you saw a commercial that said "Take care of your soul"? Actually, the last thing I looked at in that magazine was an ad that said if you want happiness, drink this carbonated, sugary beverage. Is that going to help my soul?

I think the thing that draws me in in terms of recognizing that God has given us these unique souls is that we are each incredibly gifted individuals, that God has made us, and that God cares about us, cares about our souls. Did Christ die for our bodies? Maybe. But it's really about you and me, who we are; it's about the essence of us. It's incredible that God loves each of us, loves us as the souls we are and wants to invite us to let those souls grow, let us become the very beings that God created us to be.

One of the reasons I think it's so important to me is that where else are we invited to really be who we are? So many other places it feels like we are invited to be somebody else. But God invites us to be the people that God made us to be and to know we are loved and valued as God's children, the souls that God has made and given us. So that's what I wanted to say: I think we need to pay attention to our souls.

This summer I spent some time at the Northumbria Community, and I was looking at some of the questions they ask. One of the questions they ask is, "Whom do you seek?" So when I was thinking about this issue of my own soul and how it is cared for, where is it cared for, one of the things I realized is that it is Jesus saying, "I want to care for your souls. When you are heavy burdened, put on my yoke. It is easy and light. I will give you rest for your soul." It makes sense to seek Jesus as the one that cares for our souls.

Throughout his ministry, and in many ways in his death, Jesus invites us to know the fullness of God's willingness to renew our souls and help us be who we are. Not being somebody else, but who we are.

The trouble I have with some of this is that sometimes it begins to feel a little bit like we need to be selfish. But I don't think that's what Jesus is saying. In fact, he encourages us to recognize that if we try to gain the whole world but lose our souls, what have we gained? The idea is that if we come to him, he will teach us what's good for our souls. It's interesting that what I think he teaches us is that what's good for our soul is to love one another. Love others. Care for one another as we have been cared for by him, and to receive that care. Sometimes receiving care is just as hard. He cares for our souls.

Just one final thing I want to note. As he invited us as those who are unique souls to be cared for, he also invites us to gather with one another. That's what that passage out of Acts is about. As they were praying together, they became of one heart and one soul. There is this idea that as unique as we are—that's what Paul talks about in Corinthians 12, different parts of one body—there's a way that our souls join together and form the community of faith, become a family. When we come around the table we recognize him, not leaving us as individual souls, but enabling us to belong and to care for one another and to find that that's where our souls are really cared for and come alive.

For me it was a bit of a revelation thinking about my soul. It feels different than just thinking about myself. It feels like there is something deeper, something God-given that God wants to draw us further into and enable us to inhabit, and how little of the world around us seems to do that. So I invite you to think about how you care for your own soul and how your soul is cared for by God, and how in caring for each other our soul itself is given life. Jesus said, "Come to me you who are heavy burdened and I will give you rest — rest for your soul." Amen.