

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THE SOULS UNDERNEATH THE ALTAR

What is man? The Bible declares that man was created by God: “Then God said, *Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’* (Gen. 1:26-28). The late R. C. Sproul, in commenting on this text, observed, “The world we live in today puts more value on sea turtle eggs than on the human embryo. We give more dignity to whales than to humanity, which is a reversal of the order of creation. God created mankind alone in His image. In a sense, God created man and woman as His vice-regents, as His deputy rulers over all creation. That is the status God accorded to humanity. That is what the Scriptures mean when they tell us man and woman were made in the *imago Dei*, or the image of God. What is this distinctive dimension of human beings that makes them different from all other members of the animal kingdom? Historically, there have been many attempts to locate the distinctive characteristics of the image of God. We read in Genesis 1:26, *Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.’* Two distinct words are used here: *image* and *likeness*.”¹ Elsewhere Sproul has written: “Human beings, created in the image and likeness of God, are creatures made out of a material body and a non-material soul. The soul is sometimes referred to as spirit. Both body and soul are created by God and are distinct aspects of our personal makeup. The biblical view of human beings differs sharply from early Greek views. Our body and soul make up a *duality*, not a *dualism*. In Greek dualistic theories the body and soul are seen as incompatible substances that coexist in constant tension. They are fundamentally incompatible. Usually dualism asserts that there is something inherently evil or imperfect about anything physical and therefore sees the body as an evil container for the pure soul. For the Greek, salvation ultimately meant redemption *from* the body when the soul is finally released from the prison house of the flesh. The biblical view of the body is that it is created good and has no inherent evil in its physical substance. Yet it suffers from moral corruption just like the soul. Human beings are sinful in both body and soul. Christianity, far from teaching redemption *from* the body, teaches redemption *of* the body. As a duality, human beings are one entity with two distinct parts united by God’s act of creation. There is no necessity, either philosophically or exegetically, to add a third part or substance (such as spirit) to bridge a dualistic tension. Orthodox theology rejects the trichotomous view of human beings, by which we are conceived of in three distinct parts: body, soul, and spirit. Though many theologians have argued for the natural or essential immortality of the human soul, it is important to remember that the human soul is: (1) created by God and is not inherently eternal; (2) though not composed of matter and open to dissolution by physical forces, it is nevertheless capable of being destroyed by God. The soul cannot exist for a moment apart from the sustaining power of God. *In Him we live and move and have our being* (Acts 17:28). At death, though the body dies, the soul of both the believer and unbeliever continues to live. Believers await

the consummation of their redemption with the resurrection and glorification of their bodies, while the impenitent await the eternal judgment of God. Because God preserves the soul from death, human beings have a continuity of conscious personal existence beyond the grave. The whole person is fallen; both body and soul are the objects of God's saving grace."²

John Murray helpfully spells this out: "Scripture calls disembodied persons spirits (Heb. 12:23; 1 Pet. 3:19) and portrays the disembodied state as one of consciousness and awareness of personal identity (Luke 9:30, 31; Luke 16:19-31; Luke 23:43; 2 Cor. 5:1-10; Phil. 1:22, 23). When Paul says: *We are of good courage and are willing rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord* (2 Cor. 5:8), and says that he had the *desire to depart and to be with Christ, for it is far better* (Phil. 1:23), what he desired is inconceivable apart from the retention of personal identity, the intelligent exercise of the functions of personality, and communion with the Saviour in the fullest exercise of these attributes. On the basis of these biblical data we must conclude that man is spirit or soul, as well as body. There is an aspect to his person distinct from the body. There belongs to his identity as man an entity metaphysically differentiated from the body, and endowed with properties and qualities in virtue of which it is not subject to the dissolution which the body undergoes at death. This entity retains its identity and differentiating character after death. More properly, in virtue of spirit the person retains his identity, and continues to exist and be active in a realm and mode of existence consonant with and adapted to the disembodied state. The highest exercises of man as a rational, moral, religious being are predicable of man by reason of this aspect. All that we are most characteristically as beings created in the image of God, has its seat, unity, and abiding meaning in this entity. There is an *ego*, spiritual in nature, indivisible and indestructible, continuously subsistent and active through all the changes of life in this world, in the disembodied state, and in the resurrected life in the age to come. We must not suppose, however, that the term *soul* as it occurs in Scripture always refers to this distinct and differentiated aspect of human personality. *Soul* has various applications even when used of man. In numerous cases it refers simply to life (cf. Matt. 6:25; 10:39; 16:25, 26; 20:28; Luke 14:26; John 10:11-18; Acts 15:26; 20:10; Phil. 2:30; 1 John 3:16), life constituted in the body. *Soul* is frequently the synonym of person and can stand for the personal pronoun (cf. Matt. 12:18; Luke 12:19; Acts 2:27, 41, 43; 3:23; Rom. 2:9; 13:1; Heb. 10:38; James 1:21; 5:20; 1 Pet. 1:9; 2:25). The thesis is simply that, with sufficient frequency, *soul* as *spirit* is used to designate the distinguishing component in the human person."³

- I. ***THE FIFTH SEAL AND THE SOULS OF THE SLAIN.*** The scene shifts once more from what is happening on earth back to heaven. Regarding these saints Letham notes, "In this vision accorded to John, the souls of the martyrs are conscious of the passing of time, aware of their surroundings, and able to communicate *with a loud voice* in their own sphere. They have an awareness of the delay of the Parousia and the consummation, and long for its fulfillment and the execution of justice, when things are set right."⁴
 - A. ***Their Request.*** "Under the altar in verse 9 places the scene in the temple of heaven. In 8:3, 5 and 9:13, *the altar* is the golden altar of incense that stood in the tabernacle in front of the Most Holy Place (Ex. 30:1ff.; Heb. 9:4). If this is the altar John sees the prayers of the saints will be for God's vindication of the martyrs of Christ (compare Luke 18:7-8). Revelation 6:10 is often seen as being too bloodthirsty. But when you pray for deliverance from the enemy, it follows that you usually pray for judgment on the enemy. It is difficult for Americans who have never suffered as the Christians did in the early centuries, nor as many do in some parts of the world today, to truly empathize with the martyred saints. It should also be noted that these Christians are following the teaching of Paul in Romans 12:19 (NIV): *Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge, I will repay,' says the Lord.* Though believers are forbidden to take revenge, God will vindicate His elect by punishing those who kill them (Luke 18:7 f.; 2 Thess. 1:8)."⁵

B. *The Response.* “The Lord’s response to the martyrs’ appeal for speedy justice is a gift and a strange word of hope. As the riders of judgment horses were given a crown, a sword, and authority to kill, so each of these sacrificial victims under the altar is given a white robe, symbolic of victory through faithful purity (Rev. 3:4-5). When we see this multitude of martyrs again in the interlude between seals 6 and 7, their multiethnic character will be evident (7:9), but also their song will have shifted from the minor key of lament to the major chords of celebration for the salvation won by the Lamb (7:10, 13-14). The word of hope includes the counsel to *rest for a little while longer*, anticipating the second of Revelation’s seven benedictions, which pronounces *the dead who die in the Lord from now on* blessed because they *rest from their labors, for their deeds follow with them* (14:13). The mixed experience of the church on earth – liberated, consecrated, and crowned by the Lamb but also assailed by enemies – is reflected in the ambivalent status of the martyrs in heaven who are anxiously awaiting justice now delayed but also celebrating Sabbath rest. The strangeness of this word of hope lies in the measure used to mark the duration of the delay: *until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, would be completed also* (6:11). Here is a clear answer to our When? question, but it will only frustrate the date setters. The Lamb will return to avenge his witnesses’ blood just as soon as the very last martyr lays down his or her life. More familiar to us and more pleasant is the prerequisite to his Parousia that Jesus announced in Mark 13:10 (*The gospel must first be preached to all the nations*) and its corollary, that God delays not because he is late but because he is *patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance* (2 Peter 3:9; cf. Rom. 2:4). Accompanying the worldwide spread of God’s good news, however, is the prolonged affliction of the church that bears this joyful message. The days on God’s calendar are marked off, one by one, in the blood of the martyrs.”⁶

ENDNOTES

¹R. C. Sproul, *Everyone’s A Theologian: An Introduction to Systematic* (Reformation Trust, 2014), p. 100.

²R. C. Sproul, *Essential Truths of The Christian Faith* (Tyndale, 1992), p. 133.

³*Collected Writings of John Murray II* (Banner of Truth, 1977), p. 20.

⁴Robert Letham, *Systematic Theology* (Crossway, 2019), p. 826.

⁵J. P. Newport, *The Lion and The Lamb* (Broadman, 1986), p. 188.

⁶D. E. Johnson, *Triumph of The Lamb* (P&R, 2001), p. 125.