

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine God’s spirituality, which is the first of his communicable attributes we are considering. Dr. Spencer, you ended last time by saying that God has revealed a number of things about the nature of spirit to us. What has he revealed?

Dr. Spencer: Let’s first look at the words used. I mentioned last time that both the Hebrew and Greek words that are translated as spirit in our Bibles also mean breath or wind. Let’s stick with looking at the Greek word for spirit, which is πνεῦμα (pneuma). This is a very interesting word and has a long history of usage in classical Greek prior to the time of the New Testament.¹

Since breath is associated with living beings it should not be surprising that the word for breath would be closely associated with the idea of life. In the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Gerhard Friedrich notes that “it is natural that *via* the sense ‘breath of life’ πνεῦμα itself should take on the direct sense of ‘life’ or ‘living creature’.”²

Marc Roby: That does make sense. Certainly, the expression “breath of life” is a familiar one even today.

Dr. Spencer: It definitely is a familiar way to speak of the vital force that animates physical bodies. Also, since wind is capable of doing significant work, it also should not be surprising that the word for wind would be associated with a forcible influence of one being on another. In his section dealing with the use of the word in ancient Greek myths and religion, Friedrich writes that “The ‘breath’ of wind or of breathing is a form of being and mode of presentation in which especially higher divine powers of the most varied kinds, which man cannot control, impart something of the vital essence and power which they are to man or nature, whether it be for good or evil.”³

When he speaks of “higher divine powers of the most varied kinds” we must remember that he is writing about the usage in Greek myths and religion. But this makes it clear how the word was used and how it would have been understood even prior to the writing of the New Testament.

Marc Roby: In other words, one spiritual being can influence another, just as the wind can influence objects.

Dr. Spencer: I think that is the idea. And that influence can be for good or evil as he says, which is a point we will come back to later. Another interesting point that Friedrich brings out is that wind does not have a beginning.⁴

Marc Roby: That is an interesting observation.

¹ Gerhard Friedrich (Trans. By G. Bromley), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. VI, Eerdmans, 1964-1976, pp 354-359

² Ibid, pg. 336 (parenthetical reference omitted)

³ Ibid, pg. 343

⁴ Ibid, pg. 340

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is. It isn't something you normally think about, but where does a wind begin? There is no answer to that question. Of course, we all understand that if we are going to be scientific about it a wind is just the movement of air in the atmosphere, which is a continuous entity surrounding our earth, but if you think about it more poetically, the wind has no beginning or end, it simply exists. It can be stronger or weaker and it can change direction, but it has no beginning or end.

Marc Roby: I like the poetic view better. Does Friedrich say anything else that will be helpful to our discussion?

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely, there are three more things I would like to mention. First, he points out that because of the use of πνεῦμα as the breath or principle of life, it is often synonymous with the Greek word for soul, which is ψυχή (psuchā).

Marc Roby: That shouldn't be a big surprise to anyone. The words soul and spirit are often used interchangeably in English as well.

Dr. Spencer: They certainly are. And they are often used interchangeably in the Hebrew Old Testament too. But going into that would get us very much off topic, so for the time being let's stick with the Greek word for spirit.

Marc Roby: Alright. What is the second thing you wanted to mention?

Dr. Spencer: Friedrich notes that because the wind is seen as having no beginning, "The concept of the generative and life-creating cosmogonic power of wind is thus widespread in primitive mythology." Cosmogony is the study of the origin of the universe, so when he refers to the "life-creating cosmogonic power" of the wind I take it to mean the origin of life in our universe.

Marc Roby: That is again interesting, and certainly fits with God, who created all things, being the only life-giving spirit. In Genesis 2:7 we read that "the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being."⁵ What is the third thing you want to tell us about?

Dr. Spencer: I want to point out that even though there is a long history to the use of the Greek word, the New Testament use is still very different. Friedrich notes that "The constitutive factor of πνεῦμα in the Greek world is always its subtle and powerful corporeality. Because of its material character it is never spiritual in the strict sense, as in the NT. It is never wholly outside the realm of sense."⁶ This is a clear difference between the use of the term in the Bible and its prior use prior to that outside of the Bible. In the Bible, the word spirit is never used of a physical being.

⁵ All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® (1984 version). Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The "NIV" and "New International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™.

⁶ Friedrich, op. cit., pg. 357

Marc Roby: I guess it is hardly surprising that the New Testament usage would introduce a unique element. After all, the New Testament is not telling us about some mythological character in a story, it is telling us about the true and living God, the Creator of the universe. What else do you want to say about the word spirit?

Dr. Spencer: There are a number of things about the word that are fairly obvious, but it will be worthwhile to list some of them. I think the first thing anyone thinks of when you see the word spirit is that it is something that is invisible. In other words, it is not made of ordinary matter.

Marc Roby: I would think that is one of the primary things that Jesus is teaching us in John 4:24 when he says that “God is spirit.”

Dr. Spencer: I think you’re right about that. And it is worth noting that this is again primarily, although not entirely, a negative description of God. He is *not* visible.

Marc Roby: In that sense this is like the incommunicable attributes we discussed, which we noted are often described negatively.

Dr. Spencer: That’s right.

Marc Roby: What else can we say about a spirit?

Dr. Spencer: Another thing that comes readily to mind is that a spirit does not have a body. This goes along of course with being invisible, if by “body” we mean a body made out of matter as we are. But it is an important thing to say. Remember that when we discussed God’s omnipresence we noted that God is everywhere *in the totality of his being*. That is not possible if he has spatial dimensions at all, even if they are in different dimensions than the three spatial dimensions we experience.

At the same time, we must recognize that the Bible clearly indicates that at least some spirits can make themselves visible to us as having bodies. For example, in John 20:11-12 we read about Mary Magdalene going to visit Jesus’ tomb on Sunday after his crucifixion and we are told that “Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus’ body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.”

Marc Roby: An even more dramatic interaction is described in Genesis 32, where we read about Jacob wrestling with God in the flesh. We are first told that Jacob was wrestling with a man and the man touched his hip and somehow disabled him. Then, in Genesis 32:28, we read that “the man said, ‘Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome.’”

Dr. Spencer: That is a better example. Not only could Jacob see this man, he could wrestle with him. Now, there is debate about whether Jacob wrestled with an angel or a theophany, which is a manifestation of God himself. Hosea 12:4-5 tell us about this wrestling match; and we read there, “He struggled with the angel and overcame him; he wept and begged for his favor. He found him at Bethel and talked with him there—the LORD God Almighty, the LORD is his name of

renown!” For our present purposes it doesn’t matter whether this was an angel or God himself. The point is that some spirits can manifest themselves in physically tangible ways.

Marc Roby: That is one of the most amazing events described in all of Scripture.

Dr. Spencer: It is. And the name Israel means one who struggles with God.

Marc Roby: Alright. We have established that spirits are invisible and do not have bodies, although some of them can in some way at least manifest themselves as visible, physical beings. What else do we know about them?

Dr. Spencer: We know that that they are self-conscious, moral and volitional beings. This is obvious from the fact that Scripture consistently portrays God and angels as being personal beings who make real decisions and that angels are morally accountable for their decisions. It is also something we can deduce based on our own nature.

Marc Roby: Can you explain that last statement?

Dr. Spencer: Sure, I have two different arguments to present to support this position. First, I noted last time that it is impossible to explain volitional creatures like us if the material universe is all that exists. Atoms in motion according to the laws of physics cannot explain any creature that makes real decisions. And I noted that the Bible calls this non-physical part of us our spirit.

So, the spirit is the part of us that makes us self-conscious, volitional beings and it is our decisions that can be judged as morally good or bad. Our bodies simply carry out the decisions we make. I don’t think you can blame your feet and legs for carrying you into sin. Our physical brains are obviously involved as well and even though we know a great deal about the electrochemical functioning of the brain, we know next to nothing about how thoughts and memories work and we know absolutely nothing about how the spirit works with our physical brains.

Marc Roby: But we can say that our spirit must, somehow, be able to influence our physical bodies.

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. Although my spirit is what makes real decisions, my physical brain must send certain signals down the nerves of my body in order for my body to do anything, even just to continue breathing or to keep my heart pumping. Now it is certainly possible that things like my heart pumping and breathing, in other words functions of what is called my autonomic nervous system, may not need to involve my spirit; they could very well be entirely physical. But if I do something voluntary, like lifting my arm, that decision is made by my spirit but my arm only raises when the proper signals are sent to the muscles involved, which requires my physical brain to also be involved. At this time we have no idea how the spirit might interact with our physical brains, but we don’t need to worry about that. All we need to notice for now is that spirits are obviously able to interact in some way with our physical universe.

Marc Roby: I agree that it is obvious there must be interaction. You said you had two arguments to support the contention that we can deduce the fact that spirits are self-conscious, moral, volitional beings from our human nature; what is the second?

Dr. Spencer: The second is that our spirits can exist independently of our bodies, but the opposite statement is not true. The Bible is clear about this. First, you have the statement in Hebrews 12:23 about “the spirits of righteous men made perfect” being in heaven. When we die, our spirits go to either heaven or hell and await the second coming of Jesus Christ, which is when there will be a resurrection of our bodies as well. But during that time, we exist as pure spirit.

Marc Roby: And in Luke 23:43 we read that Jesus Christ told the thief who repented on the cross that “today you will be with me in paradise.” That had to have been in his spirit since he body was still hanging on the cross and we know that our bodies will not be resurrected until Christ returns.

Dr. Spencer: That definitely is further evidence of the clear teaching of the Bible that our spirits, or souls, will exist independent of the body after we die. Theologians call this the intermediate state. Further biblical support is provided by what the apostle Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:8. He wrote that he “would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.” So, it is clear that he expected to come into the Lord’s presence immediately after dying, which again had to be in his spirit. There are many other examples we could give from Scripture, for example the parable of Lazarus and the rich man from Luke 16. In Verse 22 we read that when Lazarus died, “the angels carried him to Abraham’s side.” Notice that not only is Lazarus portrayed as going to heaven immediately, which had to be in his spirit, but we are also told that Abraham was there even though Abraham had been dead for nearly 2,000 years at that time. We also have the evidence of the mount of transfiguration, which we read about in Luke 9:28-36. In that instance, Peter, James and John were witnesses not only of Christ’s glory, but also of his talking with Moses and Elijah. Moses and Elijah were obviously not there in their physical bodies, those had been dead for over 1,000 years. And yet they were talking with Jesus.

Marc Roby: I also think about Paul’s comment about his experience of heaven, in 2 Corinthians 12:2 he says, “Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows.”

Dr. Spencer: That is another interesting example. Paul leaves open the possibility that it was only his spirit that was shown heaven. It may have been a true out-of-body experience.

Marc Roby: I think that is enough evidence to make the case that our spirits can exist without our bodies and that they are still conscious persons and able to interact with others.

Dr. Spencer: The biblical view is clear that our spirit is the seat of who we are. The body is merely a physical house for the spirit.

Marc Roby: But we don’t want to go the way of the ancient Greeks then and conclude that the body is evil and the spirit is good.

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely not. That is a heresy which is, in fact, completely the opposite of the truth. We are told in Genesis 1:31 that when God finished creating this universe, including man, he “saw all that he had made, and it was very good.” We can conclude that our physical bodies were very good in their original state. We are sinners as a result of the fall of Adam and it isn’t our physical bodies that are the seat of our sin, it is our spirit, or soul. The spirit is the seat of who we are, our personality and thinking. Therefore, it is our spirit that is the cause of sin, not

our body. Remember that a minute ago I read Hebrews 12:23 about “the spirits of righteous men made perfect” being in heaven. Think about that; if our spirits need to be “made perfect”, it is obvious that they have something wrong with them now. Of course, our physical bodies have much that is wrong with them too, but this is the result of sin, not the cause of sin.

Marc Roby: Let me summarize what we have learned so far. Spirits are self-conscious, intelligent, moral, volitional, personal beings. There are beings that are pure spirit, including God and angels, but man has a dual nature, he has both a physical body and a spirit. Our spirit is the essential element. It is the seat of our personality and decision-making ability and can exist without the body.

Dr. Spencer: That’s a good summary.

Marc Roby: And I think that is about all the time we have for today. I’d like to remind our listeners that they can email any questions or comments they might have to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We appreciate hearing from you and may answer your question or present your comment in a future session.