

ARTICLE

How remembering the importance of our souls changes our outlook during a pandemic

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Much has been said in Christian circles lately to remind us that the current viral crisis presents us with a novel set of particular problems, but it by no means changes one of our general problems: unless the Lord tarries, we shall all face death. We are confronted with a new way to die—and to suffer before we do—but the certainty of death and suffering has been present the whole time.

These are healthy reminders. They should be at the forefront of our minds at all times, regardless of pandemics, and they should be woven throughout every presentation we make of the gospel.

But there is another aspect worth considering that often escapes our notice: the importance of viewing ourselves not just as bodies but as spiritual beings who have a soul as well.

There is a tendency in our modern era of brain imaging, scientific reductionism, and naturalistic evolutionary explanations to think that a person is nothing but a body. The traditional Christian teaching that humanity was created a little lower than the angels has been supplanted by a view that says we are just a little higher than the apes. The belief that we are “soulful creatures” has been at the heart of Christian teaching about the nature of humanity since the beginning, but today we are told that believing in a spiritual aspect to our nature is out of step with modern science. There are good answers to these modern challenges to Christian teaching, but let us instead take a few minutes to reflect on the importance of the classic Christian perspective in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.^[1]

It is natural, when faced with mortal threats to the body, to focus on protection from them as our immediate and most pressing concern. The danger, however, is to lose sight of something equally important; indeed, if we are to believe Jesus Christ, infinitely more important. When discussing the various fears that beset humanity—things like hunger, lack of shelter and clothing, and even persecution—Jesus snaps our attention back to what matters most. “Do not be

afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul” (Matt. 10:28). It is vitally important to remember that the death of our body is not the end. It is not the end of us.

Surely it is a good thing to have a body, and one day after we shed these mortal coils we will be clothed with imperishable ones. Our bodies were made by God, and having a body is how we flourish—it’s part of God’s plan for us to be embodied creatures, not only in the present life but also in the eternal kingdom to come. That is our hope and stay; without the resurrection Christianity is an empty faith and a deep deception. That is why the resurrection plays such a central role in Paul’s description of Christianity in 1 Corinthians 15. In that passage he argues that if there is no resurrection of the body, our hope is in vain. Paul reminds us that this body, which he calls our “earthly tent,” will be replaced. Yet we will not be left naked—disembodied spirits floating in the clouds—but will be further clothed by God in a “heavenly dwelling” that does not decay (2 Cor. 5:2). “We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord,” Paul says, “and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:6–8). So while our bodies are important, we are more than just our bodies. Our spirits will persist even after the body has died, and will one day be embodied again.

What is needed today is the medicine this perspective offers. Remembering that we are spiritual beings changes our outlook in several ways.

In these times when death and uncertainty stalk our globe, let us embrace and proclaim the important truth that we are more than our bodies. We would do well in these days, as Peter teaches us, to “entrust [our] souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.”

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First, it undermines the common attitude that science can solve all of our problems. Even if a vaccine for COVID-19 becomes available tomorrow, and even if we can treat everyone who is currently infected and prevent their deaths, there are more serious issues that no physical remedies can help with. Our immediate problems concern the body and its health, but our spiritual problems can only have a spiritual cure. That cure is offered by the work of Jesus Christ and is only available to those who join the invisible Church—a hospital for sinners and the only place a remedy is available. As important as the work of scientists is, their greatest accomplishments will be of no ultimate help on this front. Our problems are not all physical, so our solutions can’t be either.

Second, it provides the best motivation for seeking a cure for the virus to begin with. Unless our view of humanity is buttressed by an understanding of our spiritual nature, it is nearly impossible to adequately establish the value of human persons and why it is important to save lives. As J. P. Moreland says, “There is a deep connection between the reality of the human soul and the sort of high, intrinsic value human persons possess.”^[2] That is, without belief in the soul, it becomes difficult to provide a philosophical justification for the very task of directing science to a cure. Why should the death of a few more animals (which is all humans are in the secular materialist view) be of so much

importance? What could ground the belief we all share that every life matters? Not only would science be unable to solve all our problems, it is difficult to see why it should even try. The Christian view of humanity is uniquely positioned to explain why we think the scientific effort is worth it in the first place.

Finally, it motivates us to brace ourselves for the afterlife. It is appointed for all of us to die, and after that to stand before God’s righteous judgment of the life we lived in these bodies (Heb. 9:27). As C. S. Lewis said, “You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.”^[3] The body will die, but the soul will not. Thinking of humans as spiritual creatures protects us from the deception that physical death is the end of our existence.

In a passage where he predicted his own death, Jesus asked, “What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul?” (Mark 8:36–37) In these times when death and uncertainty stalk our globe, let us embrace and proclaim the important truth that we are more than our bodies. We would do well in these days, as Peter teaches us, to “entrust [our] souls to a faithful Creator while doing good” (1 Pet. 4:19).

Notes

1. [^] *For those who are interested, I address some of these in my upcoming book, **God on the Brain** (Crossway, July 2020).*

2. [^] J.P. Moreland, *The Soul: How We Know It's Real and Why It Matters*, (Moody Publishers, 2014), p. 15.
 3. [^] C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (HarperOne, 2001), p. 46.
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