

BESTSELLING AUTHOR
JOHN ORTBERG

FOREWORD BY DR. HENRY CLOUD



SOUL KEEPING

CARING *for* THE MOST IMPORTANT
PART *of* YOU

WHAT IS THE SOUL?

I went to pick up Dallas Willard on a typical Chicago day in February when the roads were covered with salt trying to melt the ice, but the snow was coming down so fast you could hardly see the car in front of you. I was driving my ancient Toyota Corolla, in which the alignment was so out of whack that when I went over forty miles per hour, the car shook as if it had palsy and pulled to the left. Because of an earlier accident, the seat belt on the passenger side had to be threaded through the armrest to hold the door closed.

"Sorry about the car," I offered, though I thought Dallas wouldn't even notice. He was a little grayer since I had last seen him. I had moved from California to Chicago two years earlier, but he had agreed to talk with me monthly by phone. Eventually he came to Chicago to speak at our church.

We chatted while we drove—very slowly—to lunch. Every once in a while Dallas would absentmindedly start singing a hymn, such as "Rock of Ages" or "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms," and I would join in. He used to lead music as well as preach at the little Baptist churches he served in the hills of Missouri.

We pulled into a Chili's and sat down at a table. Having not been with him in a while, I was reminded again of how at ease he was with himself. He was the same person, whether he was

talking to an assistant janitor or a famous leader. When Dallas finished speaking at a conference, people would line up to talk with him, and he always obliged them. It's not just that he didn't hurry through those conversations; he genuinely didn't seem to want to hurry. The clear impression I got was not that Dallas was working hard to be patient. It was as though impatience and worry were simply not in his body. He had an inner life that seemed at peace with the life everyone else sees.

I wanted to know that kind of inner life.

THIS TINY, FRAGILE, VULNERABLE, PRECIOUS THING ABOUT YOU

We each have an outer life and an inner one. My outer self is the public, visible me. My accomplishments, my work, and my reputation lie there. My outer world had changed a great deal since I had last seen Dallas. I was working at a church that—in the little world of my profession—was large and visible. There were more people on staff at this church than there were attendees at the church where I had last worked. Suddenly people sought out my opinion more and assumed I was smarter than I was and invited me to speak at their events. My outer world was now larger and busier and more complex than it had ever been.

But my inner world had not grown at all. My inner life is where my secret thoughts and hopes and wishes live. Because my inner life is invisible, it is easy to neglect. No one has direct access to it, so it wins no applause. Abraham Lincoln was a brilliant lawyer, but notoriously disorganized; he used to have a bulging folder labeled, "If you can't find it anywhere else, look here." My private self can begin to look as chaotic and untended as the inside of Lincoln's folder.

I thought that such a large change in my outer world would bring a quick upgrade to my inner one—more fulfillment, more gratification. Instead, the very busy-ness and complexity of it was

almost like a private blizzard that made it hard to navigate my internal world clearly.

What drew me to Dallas was the sense that here was someone who had mastered the inner life—or had at least gone much farther down that road than most. There was leisure of spirit to him. It sounds strange to say, but he had an overwhelmingly calm face.

I asked him, “Why am I not happier, now that I’m getting to do what is in many ways a dream job?” I asked him, “How can I have a private self that is flourishing no matter what my public self is doing?”

For that, Dallas said, we would have to talk about the care of the soul. I was afraid that topic might come up.

“I work at a church where my job involves saving souls,” I began. “But if someone asked me, I’d have a hard time saying exactly what a soul is. Is *soul* just a word religious people throw around?”

I wasn’t prepared for his answer.

“Brother John, why is there such value and mystery to your existence? The really deep reason is because of this tiny, fragile, vulnerable, precious thing about you called your *soul*. You are not just a self; you are a soul. ‘The LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.’ You’re a soul made by God, made for God, and made to need God, which means you were not made to be self-sufficient.”

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DALLAS WILLARD

In one of his books, Dallas has further explained,

What is running your life at any given moment is your soul. Not external circumstances, not your thoughts, not your intentions, not even your feelings, but your soul. The soul is that aspect of your whole being that correlates, integrates, and enlivens everything going on in the various dimensions of the self. The soul is the life center of human beings.

THE LIFE CENTER OF HUMAN BEINGS

I thought I knew what Dallas meant. Sometimes I will watch the sun set at the beach while I smell the saltwater and listen to the crashing surf; or I will be standing on a ledge along the Big Sur overlooking a mountain range and feel this enormous combination of joy and awe. There is a depth to those moments that goes beyond a body. Your soul connects your thoughts and your sensations and your gratitude and your will and sends a message to your entire being. You can send that message to other persons; you can send it to God. You can say “Wow!” to the universe. That is the soul at work.

“Anytime you want to care for something, you have to understand it, whether it’s a beagle or a BMW,” Dallas continued. “Take that high-performance automobile you were driving. [Oops! He had noticed after all.] If a car is tuned and fueled and oiled and aligned, it is capable of amazing things—even *your* car,” he said, smiling. “If you do not understand its parts and how they work—well, we see the result.”

Dallas went on to make the obvious connection. He said it is terribly important to understand the “parts” of the inner life. Each one must be healthy and working as God intended it to work. If your soul is healthy, no external circumstance can destroy your life. If your soul is unhealthy, no external circumstance can redeem your life.

But what exactly is the soul?

Dallas took a napkin and drew the first of a series of concentric circles. The innermost circle, according to Dallas, is the human will—your capacity to choose. You can say, “Yes,” and you can say, “No.” The will is what makes you a person and not a thing. It’s what the Bible is talking about when it says God made people to “exercise dominion.” The will is something we treasure greatly in ourselves and others.

But if the will is so central, why isn’t spiritual life a lot easier? Why can’t I simply tell people to use their will to do what God says or to feel God’s presence?

"The will is very central, but it's also incredibly limited," Dallas explained. "Do you ever find yourself doing something that goes against your better judgment or values?"

"Hardly ever," I said as I finished my second piece of molten hot fudge cake and ice cream.

"The will is very good at making simple and large commitments like getting married, or deciding to move someplace," Dallas explained. "But it is very bad at trying to override habits and patterns and attitudes that are deeply rooted in us. If you try to improve your soul by willpower, you will exhaust yourself and everyone around you."

Why is that? Dallas drew a second circle around the first to illustrate.

"The next part of the person is the mind. In the ancient world, the mind referred to both a person's thoughts and their feelings. By thoughts I mean all the ways a person is conscious of things."

That made a lot of sense to me. Thoughts and feelings are flowing through us all the time, mostly flowing in habitual patterns that willpower alone cannot sustainably redirect. When I think thoughts that are false or unworthy, when I entertain desires that are in opposition to what God wants for my life, I damage my soul. The apostle Paul says, "The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace."

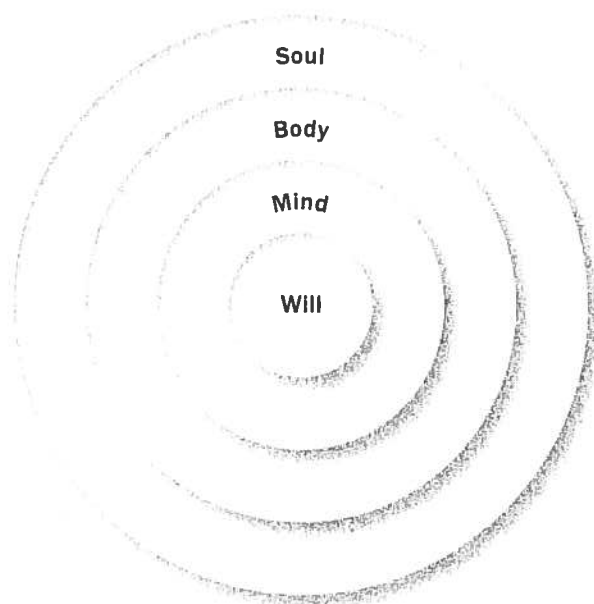
The mind craves to be at peace.

Dallas drew another circle that he said represents our bodies. "The body is our little kingdom. That's the one place in all the universe where our tiny wills have a chance to be in charge. Imagine for a moment you had a will and a mind but no body."

Huh?

"Our bodies are like our little 'power packs.' We couldn't be us without them. They are filled with all kinds of appetites and all kinds of habits. In a way, we 'outsource' behaviors from tying our shoelaces, to driving a car, to our bodies, so that our wills and our minds don't have to worry about them. Our bodies are amazing. But they are not the whole story. I am not just the stuff my body is made of."

He drew another circle, and this one, he said, represents the soul.



THE OPERATING SYSTEM OF YOUR LIFE

"The soul is the capacity to integrate all the parts into a single, whole life. It is something like a program that runs a computer; you don't usually notice it unless it messes up."

The soul is the capacity to integrate all the parts into a single, whole life.

DALLAS WILLARD

According to Dallas, the soul seeks harmony, connection, and integration. That is why *integrity* is such a deep soul-word. The human soul seeks to integrate our will and

our mind and our body into an integral person. Beyond that, the soul seeks to connect us with other people, with creation, and with God himself—who made us to be rooted in him the way a tree is rooted by a life-giving stream.

Dallas helped me understand what I have wondered over the

years about the soul. It is the deepest part of you, and it is the whole person. This is so true that the word *soul*, in both the Old and New Testaments and elsewhere in the ancient world, is often simply a synonym for the person. Even in our day it is interesting how our language reflects this. Questions on airplane or ship records sometimes ask, "How many souls on board?" Most people have no idea where this comes from, but it traces its origins to the ancient world. For example, in Acts 27:37, Luke reports on a shipwreck involving the apostle Paul: "And we were all in the ship two hundred threescore and sixteen [276] souls."

Your soul is what integrates your will (your intentions), your mind (your thoughts and feelings, your values and conscience), and your body (your face, body language, and actions) into a single life. A soul is healthy — well-ordered — when there is harmony between these three entities and God's intent for all creation. When you are connected with God and other people in life, you have a healthy soul.

UNHEALTHY SOULS

Therefore, according to Dallas, an unhealthy soul is one that experiences *dis-integration*, and sin always causes the disintegration of the soul. As Leonard Cohen put it, "The blizzard of the world has crossed the threshold, and it has overturned the order of the soul." A few years ago I was asked to speak at the church of a pastor in the Deep South whose success had made him famous. Pictures of him with famous people and framed covers of his best-selling books lined his office walls. But now he was beyond the age when most people retire, his church was shrinking, his influence was waning, and he was miserable.

When I met this pastor, he began to tell me how wrong his critics were, even though I hardly knew him or his critics. He chastised his people for not bringing enough visitors to fill the empty seats. "I'm tired of looking at empty seats," he said, as if the goal of church is empty-seat avoidance. He had climbed to remarkable heights in church ministry, but his mind was preoccupied by bitter

thoughts. His face attempted smiles that were disconnected from his feelings, and his will strained to maintain a façade that had been hollowed out long ago.

His soul was *dis-integrating*.

I thought of another man, a businessman who devoted his life to making money. His children always knew that they had less priority than his job. He never said so, of course, but our deepest devotions simply leak out of our bodies by how we spend our time and what makes us smile and what claims our energy. The man built a corporate empire, but his employees all felt used.

He and his wife bought a magnificent home overlooking the ocean in Southern California. He had a stroke, yet no one came to visit him. He sits in a wheelchair now, breathing from an oxygen tank, alone in a mansion cage.

He still obsesses over what he owns and remains incapable of gratitude or generosity.

This is the ruined soul.

When I think of that pastor and this businessman, I recall Jesus' memorable words about the soul: "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?" I have always thought this verse meant that in the long run it won't do you any good to acquire a lot of money and have a lot of sex and other sensual pleasures if you end up going to hell.

When I mentioned that to Dallas, he gently corrected me: "That is *not* what Jesus is saying. Jesus is not talking here about people going to hell."

He explained that Jesus is talking about a diagnosis, not a destination. If we think of hell as a torture chamber and heaven as a pleasure factory, we will never understand Jesus' point. For the ruined soul—that is, where the will and the mind and the body are disintegrated, disconnected from God, and living at odds with the way God made life in the universe to run—acquiring the whole world could not even produce satisfaction, let alone meaning and goodness.

To lose my soul means I no longer have a healthy center that organizes and guides my life. I am a car without a steering wheel.

It doesn't matter how fast I can go, because I am a crash waiting to happen.

Farmers in the Midwest used to run a rope from their house to the barn at the first sight of a blizzard. They knew stories of people who had died in their own yards during a whiteout because they couldn't find their way home. Parker Palmer writes that the "blizzard of the world" is the fear and frenzy and deceit and indifference to the suffering of others that separates us from our own souls and our moral bearings. What we need, he said, is a rope from the back door to the barn so we can find our way home again. "When we catch sight of the soul, we can survive the blizzard without losing our hope or our way."

You don't have to believe the Bible to believe this. Just look around you.

A mom struggles to create the perfect home. Her husband does not help much. She doesn't tell him how much she resents it, mostly because she's always been afraid of conflict. She is angry at her children for not being perfect, for not being on track to get into the right school, for not making her look good as a mom. She is angry at her body for aging; feeling attractive has been the one unforced sense of worth in her life, and it is ebbing away. She withdraws. She drinks a little too much. She gossips with her friends about her other friends. She finds ways to fill time.

She thinks that her problem is her husband, or her kids, or her age, but it's not. It is her soul.

I don't mean to be unkind. Only God knows, with any given individual, what battles they may have fought with addiction or biology or abuse or simply temptations that I have never known. The point is that what Jesus said is true: gaining the outside world doesn't help you if your inside world collapses. Look at me. Look at you.

We live on the planet of lost souls. That is the human problem. It is not some superficial thing that only relates to getting the right afterlife if you affirm the right doctrines. It has to do with the depth of the human condition, which Jesus identified as nobody else ever has.

THE NEGLECTED SOUL DOESN'T GO AWAY; IT GOES AWRY

Our world has replaced the word *soul* with the word *self*, and they are not the same thing. The more we focus on our selves, the more we neglect our souls.

The word *psychologist* comes from the Greek word *psyche*, which actually means "soul." That ought to be what psychology is about, apart from what anyone thinks about religion. Sigmund Freud wrote that "Treatment of the *psyche* means . . . treatment of the soul. One could also understand it to mean treatment of sickness when it occurs in the life of the soul."

But psychology has focused on the self, and self carries a totally different connotation than soul. To focus on my soul means to look at my life under the care and connection of God. To focus on myself apart from God means losing awareness of what matters most.

The *Journal of the American Medical Association* cited a study that indicates that in the twentieth century, people who lived in each generation were three times more likely to experience depression than folks in the generation before them. Despite the rise of the mental health profession, people are becoming increasingly vulnerable to depression. Why? Martin Seligman, a brilliant psychologist with no religious ax to grind, has a theory that it's because we have replaced church, faith, and community with a tiny little unit that cannot bear the weight of meaning. That's the self. We're all about the self. We revolve our lives around ourselves.

Ironically, the more obsessed we are with our selves, the more we neglect our souls.

All of our language reflects this. If you're empty, you need to fulfill *yourself*. If you're stressed, learn how to take care of *yourself*. If you're on a job interview, you have to believe in *yourself*. If you're at the tattoo parlor, you must learn to express *yourself*. If someone dares to criticize you, you have to love *yourself*. If you're not getting your own way, you have to stand up for *yourself*. What should you do on a date? You ought to be *yourself*.

What if your *self* is a train wreck? What do you do then?

Self is a stand-alone, do-it-yourself unit, while the *soul* reminds us we were not made for ourselves. The soul always exists before God. So soul is needed for deep art, poetry, and music. Former opera singer Scott Flaherty said it best: "I mean, when you sing you're giving voice to your soul." Imagine singing, "Then sings my *self*, my Savior God to thee," or "Jesus, lover of my *self*." Innately we know that the self is not the soul, even as we do everything we can to preserve it.

ATTENDING TO THE SOUL

Every now and then I try to get away to the ocean and spend most of a day alone. It's a strange thing I don't fully understand. I have a lot of people in my life who love me and will tell me so, but when I am alone for an extended period of time, all the obligations and expectations and need to perform kind of melt from my mind. I am reminded when I'm alone that God loves me—that there is something about life that is infinitely deeper than all the expectations and roles and performance stuff of my outer life. It changes my body. I can feel it. My soul feels its worth.

You are only able to live in a way that really helps and loves others when your soul feels its worth. Yet we often pay far more attention to our work or our bodies or our finances than to our souls. But the soul is what we will take into eternity.

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Attending to the soul doesn't mean we neglect those practical things like career or health. The soul lies at the center of them all. It means I don't simply ask, "How can I be more successful in my work?" or "How can I acquire more money?" Instead, I learn to understand how my involvement in each area of life is marking my soul.

In fact, your soul can be all right when everything in your world is all wrong. Consider these marvelous words from Peter to a little

flock: "Though you have not seen him [Jesus], you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls."

The salvation of your soul is not just about where you go when you die. The word *salvation* means healing or deliverance at the deepest level of who we are in the care of God through the presence of Jesus. Sooner or later, your world will fall apart. What will matter then is the soul you have constructed.

Horatio Spafford invested most of what he had in real estate. He lived in Chicago and lost everything in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. It destroyed his home. They had no insurance. He lost most of his money. In 1873 he put his wife and their four daughters (their son having died of scarlet fever in 1870) on a ship heading to England as he stayed behind to restimulate his business. A few days after the ship departed, he received a telegram from his wife: "Saved alone. What shall I do?" There had been a shipwreck. All four of their daughters perished. Horatio quickly boarded another ship to England, and as it passed over the very same place in the ocean where his daughters had drowned, he wrote these words to as song:

When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.

When Dallas and I left Chili's, it had stopped snowing. On our way home, I sang that song with Dallas. Many years later, on another voyage, in his home in Box Canyon, we would sing it again.

So what makes it well with my soul?