

## An invitation

**S** TRANGERS! You are welcome here. Let's sit by the fire a while and talk about soulful things.

It seems soulfulness is getting harder and harder to come by these days. At one time our poetry was full of enchantment and brooks had voices. Alas, the fairies and the naiads are all gone now, chased away by humorless men in white lab coats.

At one time we were mostly farmers who lived close to the good earth and its soulful pleasures. But then we abandoned our farms in the modern era for less arduous professions.

At one time we lived in villages where there were shops run by people we knew. Now our "village" is the mall where the shops are local appendages of faceless global entities.

Meanwhile celebrity and profit have become dominant forces in our increasingly secular culture. Those who are hoping to find something soulful on the display table of the corporate bookstore are likely to be disappointed.

Now we realize the disappearance of soulfulness from modern life may not seem very troubling to the workaday world. But there must be a remnant somewhere that continues to long for soulful pleasures. If so, this book was written with them in mind.

Soulfulness is unique among literary pleasures. It is not like fear and pity, the cathartic effects of tragedy. It is not like comedy or satire. It is not like the music of sweet flowing verse or good plots and characterization or the pleasures of the imagination—although it can encompass all these.

Soulfulness is greater than any aesthetic pleasure because it involves the whole soul. It is a momentary rapture that sneaks up on the soul and ravishes it with tenderness. Soulfulness is unique in another way as well, since typically it is bittersweet. This is because it incorporates both the joys and the sorrows of existence.

The soulfulness we have in mind may be experienced by some when they find themselves suddenly shaking with emotion while listening to Beethoven's "Ode to Joy." Others may experience this ravishing sensation when they see Cordelia standing before her

stubborn father and breaking our hearts as she utters the fateful words, “Love, and be silent.”

This is the type of elevated feeling that seems to be in short supply these days. There aren’t many Shakespeares or Beethovens plying their trade anymore, or at least not that we are aware of. But lovers of great soulfulness can still find what they are looking for in a perhaps surprising place. We are referring to the Bible.

In fact the case can be made that the Bible is the most soulful book of all. For one thing, it is the book of life, and the soul is above all else a living thing. Also it is the book of love—and not just any love, but a tenderhearted love that restores life, the highest example being the cross.

Our goal is to talk about the surprising soulfulness of the Bible. This is not a topic that has ever been addressed, to our knowledge. There is more to the Bible than is sometimes realized. It is not what its detractors make it out to be—or even what it may seem to be in some places where it is read on Sunday mornings.

The Bible is unparalleled for the kind of elevated feeling we have in mind. This may be important information for those who find themselves frustrated by the dearth of soulfulness in modern culture. Nor does it merely offer literary pleasure for its own sake. It promises to feed the soul and its desire for life:

Come, everyone who thirsts,  
    come to the waters;  
and he who has no money,  
    come, buy and eat!  
Come, buy wine and milk  
    without money and without price.  
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,  
    and your labor for that which does not satisfy?  
Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good,  
    and delight yourselves in rich food.  
Incline your ear, and come to me;  
    hear, that your soul may live.

We plan to show why this invitation is worthy of consideration.



## The soul delights in life

**T**HE WORD “SOULFULNESS” refers, of course, to the soul. Now a great deal of energy was spent in past ages in an attempt to define the soul.<sup>1</sup> Some thought it was pure intellect—the opposite of matter—while others tried to overcome the difference between intellect and matter and give it substance.

The philosophers never got past this great divide. They could not describe the soul without using intellect, and intellect always led them to the thing that divided them. But there is another way of talking about the soul that does not lead to divided valuations—which is to describe it in terms of its pleasures. To enumerate the things the soul delights in is to cast light on the soul itself.

This is just what the Bible does. It has a great deal to say about what does and does not satisfy the soul. According to the Bible, the highest desire of the soul is for *life*. This is clear from the very beginning. “Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.”<sup>1</sup> If it was God himself that breathed it, then life is the highest value known to man.

John said this about Christ: “In him was life, and the life was the light of men.” In other words, life is the thing we desire most. The story the Bible tells is based entirely on the

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version. A list of them by chapter can be found in Appendix B.

value of life. It begins with the granting of life, describes how life was forfeited through pride and disobedience, and ends with the restoration of life through the blood of Christ.

Life is sweet to the soul because it is the essence of the soul, which is a living thing. Meanwhile death is identified as the main source of our bitterness. Adam and Eve were told they would “surely die” if they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They ate from it anyway because they thought it would make them like God. This was the beginning of human misery.

The story of the fall is a diagnosis of the human condition. This diagnosis reflects the high value that the Bible assigns to life. As long as Adam and Eve had access to the tree of life, they were in paradise. Their unhappiness began when they were cast out of Eden and access to this tree was blocked. Then paradise returns in the very last chapter when access to the tree of life is restored by the river of Spirit issuing from the throne of God and the Lamb.

The Biblical idea that life is our “light” is unique in all literature. The Greek philosophers had a very different notion of value. They believed intellect was the light of men, not life. Unfortunately intellect produces divided values, since it is divided between itself and sense, while soulfulness involves the whole soul.

Meanwhile the Bible produces great soulfulness by bringing together the sweetness of life and the bitterness of the grave. It glorifies life more than any other book but also acknowledges that “all flesh is grass” and “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” This bittersweet combination is seen in the following psalm:

O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you;  
my soul thirsts for you;  
my flesh faints for you,  
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

The soul is thirsty for God, the giver of life and all sweetness, but experiences bitterness in the desert of mortal life. The Israelites became thirsty and began to grumble

when they were wandering in the desert after being released from bondage. God commanded Moses to strike a rock with his staff, and water flowed out to quench the thirst of all.

This is the backstory of the above verse. But the psalmist is not just thinking of the literal Desert of Sin; the desert he has in mind is this mortal life with its trials and tribulations, its unhappiness, its sorrows. The only water that can satisfy his thirst is the presence of God, who alone gives the sweet draft of life.

The deep meaning of the Exodus story does not become clear until the Crucifixion, when a soldier thrusts his spear into Christ's side. Clear blood plasma flows out, giving the appearance of water. On the cross, his blood becomes the water of life for all who believe. The psalmist's plea is finally answered.

As an aside, the "dry and thirsty land" might also be construed as the world and its death-bound culture. Perhaps the psalmist found himself living in a place where there was no love of the kind of elevated soulfulness that filled his verses. If so, then lovers of soulfulness can relate to the image in more ways than one.

The Bible is soulful because it places the highest possible value on the soul: "For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?" The *world* is the sum of all passions and pleasures. It is Rome with its engineering marvels and pleasure palaces and Greece with its philosophy and literature and art; it is success and wealth and power. But a single individual soul is worth more than all these because it is a living thing.

The world produces the *illusion of life*. Riches and fame and power can make us feel like we are first in the world and thus deceive us into feeling immortal. But these things cannot satisfy the soul because they cannot provide life.

This is shown in the parable of the rich fool. His crop is too large for his barns. "And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will

store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'"

Why does he address this materialistic conception of happiness to his soul, which is a living thing? Because he has mistaken the illusion of life for life itself. He thinks that if he is rich he will be happy. After all, riches bring leisure and seeming security.

But riches cannot give the soul the one thing it desires most. "Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" The rich fool values riches and goods because he thinks they can satisfy his soul. Christ invites us to make a more soulful valuation based on the value of life.