

# The Most Soulful Book

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## 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.”\* 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 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.

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\* All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version. A list of them by chapter can be found in Appendix B.

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.

## The “superman” and the death of soulfulness

**S**O WHAT HAPPENED to soulful poetry with all of its fanciful fairies and naiads? Why is it that we, like the psalmist, seem to live in a desert where there is no water for the soul?

Well, there are lots of reasons. They include capitalism and the Industrial Revolution, which made us rich in things and poor towards God. We did gain the whole world and lose our own souls. We also live in an age of scientific materialism, which scoffs at the idea of fairies in brooks. Don't bother looking for soulfulness in the dry, proud cadences of *Nature* or *Science*.

But there is more. There was a movement to get rid of the soul in the Modern age. The deep thinkers, led by the philosopher Nietzsche, claimed to be able to make themselves into “supermen” through the will to dominate. This hardhearted new ideal required them to eschew all things soulful, such as pity and mercy. They had to destroy soulfulness in order to justify the high opinion they had of themselves. Nietzsche even talked about going into the “caves” and stamping out soulful values.

He claimed we could become “new gods” by declaring “God is dead.” This bold gesture did not lead to the Valhalla he promised. Instead it led to the gloom and anxiety seen in modern culture. It seems killing God cannot stamp out the desire for life—but it does destroy all soulfulness. If God does not exist, then there is no such thing as a soul. Also life loses its sweetness, making the bittersweet value of soulfulness impossible.

If life is the light of men, leading them to God, then the best way to drive them away from God is to devalue life. This is why Nietzsche bitterly attacked the “will to live.” It is also why his followers became so enamored of Darwin and his notion that life appeared spontaneously in a warm little pond somewhere with “all

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sorts of ammonia and phosphoric salts, light, heat, electricity etc. present.” This made life seem unremarkable, even ordinary. Not only did nature appear to have the power to create life without divine inspiration, but it did not even have to try very hard.

But then the sweetness of life was lost, as well as all soulfulness. The “Modern” age was *intentionally* unsoulful. Sweetness was forbidden because it intimated the existence of God. Poets were no longer permitted to indulge their fancy with immortal creatures like fairies and naiads. Artists and musicians were expected to be men of steel. The tenderness of “thee” and “thou” was lost forever.

## Life unbound

**T**HERE ARE SIGNS of a shift in our attitudes about life, however. New discoveries in microbiology are making Darwin's warm little pond seem highly improbable. Miller and Ulrey's famous amino acids were light years away from the spontaneously appearing proteins of which Darwin dreamed. It now appears that RNA is necessary for the synthesis of proteins. There is no provision for something as wonderfully complicated as RNA in Darwin's pond.

Meanwhile scientists are beginning to wonder if nature is not in some way designed for life. There is "broad agreement among scientists and cosmologists that the Universe is in several respects 'fine-tuned' for life." And how fragile it all seems! A quick look at our little planet from outer space suggests that we unwitting mortals are balanced on the very edge of life. The North and South Poles are uninhabitable, while the narrow strip in the middle owes its greenness to the good fortune of being in a precise orbit around the sun, spinning at a precise rate, and even tilting precisely.

Just for fun, on some winter afternoon when you have nothing better to do, and are not snowshoeing or enjoying hot chocolate and the conversation of good friends, or listening to Schubert and his winter songs, try Googling the words "cyclooxygenase cascade" and spend an hour or two poring over Sir John Vane's remarkable discovery of a complex, multilayered feedback system in the blood and lining of the artery walls, all working together to preserve life.

But then life is not a trifling thing, not if nature goes to such great lengths to preserve it. No, life apparently has great value, even on its own terms. The advanced study of nature does not disprove the value system of the Bible. Increasingly it affirms it by showing that life is indeed the "light of men," the highest value they know.

## Restoration of life

**T**HE BIBLE IS about the restoration of life. That is why it is so soulful. Death and unhappiness came into the world when humankind deliberately disobeyed God. After that we descended into such depravity that God decided to wipe the face of the Earth clean, preserving a remnant in the ark. But then God set aside a chosen nation to be another kind of vessel of salvation. Through them the law and the prophets came into being to show the way to obtain life—and through them a savior was born.

Life was lost through human vanity but restored by the grace and perfect love of God. This is the basic outline of the Bible. There is a very soulful story early on that hints at what is to come, about Joseph and his brothers. They were jealous of him and sold him into slavery. He endured years of imprisonment in Egypt at a time when there was no thought of making prisons humane. But over time Joseph rose to power, second only to the pharaoh, and then these same double-dealing brothers fell into his clutches.

Now imagine a Hollywood screenwriter tasked with making this story into a movie. He would know just how to set the box office on fire—it would be a tale of revenge. Such stories play on our desire for identity. Our enemies make us feel small when they wrong us, and revenge stories restore a sense of power and identity by appearing to even the score.

Revenge stories are popular because of the unconscious value we put on life. We sense as living beings that life is the “light of men,” but because we fear death and nothingness we tend to want to glorify ourselves. Any slight or offense appears to diminish the value of our life, our honor, and must be avenged in order for us to feel that our existence is justified.

Joseph’s story has the perfect set-up for the revenge genre. He manages to rise above the slavery imposed on him by his brothers’ treachery and become chief counselor to the pharaoh. Then there is

a famine, and those same brothers come to him looking for food.

Revenge may have been what Joseph had in mind. He planted a silver cup in their luggage, planning to expose them as thieves. But just when the story reaches its dramatic climax he breaks down and weeps. He is overcome with love for his brothers.

Joseph could not dehumanize his brothers in the way the revenge genre requires because they were his brothers. They were not just faceless enemies to be destroyed for the sake of preserving his identity; they were a crucial part of his identity. The moment when he breaks down and weeps is one of the most soulful in all literature because it reflects a consciousness of the value of life.

Joseph's story looks forward to Christ, who was sold into the slavery of the cross by his brothers and lifted up to the right hand of God, where he has every right to judge us for our lack of love, in which we are caught red-handed every day, but instead breaks down and weeps and restores our lives when we turn to him.

The restoration of life is the theme of the Bible from the beginning to the end. This is why it is the most soulful book.



## Soulfulness is rooted in love

**T**HE BIBLE SAYS “God is love.” This love is supremely soulful because it restores life: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

God is described as a loving, gracious father who is glad to welcome the prodigal back from the depths of depravity. The Greeks and Romans had no such soulful gods. Their philosophers thought God was intellect, and the poets believed in a collection of superheroes masquerading as gods. The Hindus have no God who fits the description. The Koran does not say Allah is love.

The word *love* can mean many things, but the Bible provides the most soulful definition of all: “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us.” Love is self-sacrificing. It gives up its own life in order to build up others. It refrains from doing harm to its neighbor. It puts others first. It preserves and builds up life.

The Bible tells the story of the triumph of divine love over the selfishness and vanity of men. God made all creation and saw that it was “very good.” This simply means it was very lovable. Paradise consisted of perfect love. Adam and Eve were “one flesh,” and the creator appears to have been in the amiable habit of strolling through the garden in order to enjoy a chat with his creatures.

Then came the plot. Adam and Eve decided they were not satisfied with paradise. They were not content to be creatures; they wanted to be “like God,” the creator. They chose the evil of excessive self-love over the goodness of perfect love when they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They chose to love themselves more than they loved God and paradise.

The Bible is uniquely soulful because it equates goodness with perfect unselfish love. The greatest commandment is to love God with all our hearts and souls and minds, and the second is to love our neighbors as ourselves. All of the law and the prophets are based

on love, according to Christ.

At the same time the Bible also identifies vanity as the source of all unhappiness. Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit because they wanted to be like God. They made a very poor choice based on excessive self-love. Instead of appreciating the goodness found in God and his love, and in his creation, they decided to seek happiness in glorifying themselves.

The entire value system of the Bible is based on the choice between perfect tenderhearted love and the selfish desire to be “like God.” If we choose to love God and his goodness, and our neighbors as ourselves, we will be blessed. If we choose vanity and selfishness we will find ourselves cast out of the garden. This notion of value is soulful because it is based on the value of life. To love as Christ loved is to give life to others.

We lost paradise by choosing vanity over perfect love. This is the Bible’s diagnosis of the human condition. The Israelites were given a chance to redeem themselves through the law, which is based on love: “Do them, that you may live.” But they were unable to follow the law or to love perfectly. It was impossible for them to be holy and obtain life by their own means. Their inability to follow the law is the great object lesson of the Old Testament.

In the end, however, divine love triumphed over human vanity. God saved the world in spite of itself because “God is love” and “God so loved the world.” The cross became the most soulful symbol known to humankind. Here is one way to summarize the Bible: God created the world as a paradise of perfect love; this perfect love was shattered by human vanity; then God restored life and paradise through the perfect love of the cross.

The Bible heartily embraces three soulful virtues that are rooted in love: charity, justice, and mercy. Charity is a main theme of the law. We are commanded to take care of the widow and the orphan. Debt is to be forgiven periodically to take the burden off the backs of the poor. Farmers are told not to go over their crops a second time when they harvest but to leave the gleanings for the poor. Provision is to be made for the poor in the temple.

Christ makes charity the sign of a Christian in his parable of the sheep and the goats. “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a

stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’”

According to Christ, to be a Christian is to be charitable. And he should know! Charity also provides a very soulful identity, since to be charitable is to give life.

Mercy is the great theme of the Bible. God warned Adam and Eve that they would surely die if they ate the forbidden fruit, but he was merciful to them. He did not strike them down with lightning; he gave them a covering for their shame and made a promise of salvation. His great mercy is also seen with Cain, who murdered his brother. He did not destroy or even condemn him. He extended protection over him just as he did to his parents.

Mercy is the theme of Joseph and his brothers, as discussed. Mercy is what was shown to the people of Israel when they grumbled against God in the desert and God provided them with food and water instead of the punishment they deserved. The food was manna. Christ identified himself as the true bread of heaven, since it is through him that mercy is given to all who believe.

The psalmist says: “Gladden the soul of your servant, for to you, O Lord, do I lift up my soul. For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call upon you.” St. Paul agrees: “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”

Mercy is at the heart of the following command: “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.” Here is the same idea in Proverbs: “Do not say, ‘I will repay evil’; wait for the Lord, and he will deliver you.” And from Hosea, quoted by Christ himself: “For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the

knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.”

In the Old Testament, the law contains a very famous principle: “But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.” This sounds harsh, but actually it calls upon us to be merciful. The natural temptation when someone takes our eye is to take more in revenge. Disproportionate retribution is prohibited.

Even so, Christ goes much further: “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.”

Christ also said this: “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.” This is both a promise and a warning. It seems there is an unbreakable principle in existence. Those who are merciful receive mercy in return—but those who are not merciful receive judgment. Christ makes the point vividly with a parable. A man is about to throw one of his servants into jail because of unpaid debts. The servant begs for mercy, and his debt is forgiven. But then he shows no mercy to those who are indebted to him:

“When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

Justice is also a deeply soulful value, rooted in love and in the value of life; and there is no book, ancient or modern, that is more passionate or eloquent on the subject of justice than the Bible. God comes down firmly on the side of the poor and the dispossessed and against oppression and arrogance and exploitation of all kinds.

From Isaiah: “For I the Lord love justice; I hate robbery and wrong; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.” From Amos: “I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even

though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” This is highly exalted soulfulness.

Here is more from the Proverbs: “By justice a king builds up the land, but he who exacts gifts tears it down.” And from the Psalms: “For the word of the LORD is upright; and all his work is done in faithfulness. He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD.”

Here is what the Messiah would look like, according to prophecy:

Behold my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;  
I have put my Spirit upon him;  
he will bring forth justice to the nations.  
He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice,  
or make it heard in the street;  
a bruised reed he will not break,  
and a faintly burning wick he will not quench;  
he will faithfully bring forth justice.  
He will not grow faint or be discouraged  
till he has established justice in the earth;  
and the coastlands wait for his law.

One of the most important attributes of the Messiah will be his passion for justice, as was seen in Christ. This passion produces soulfulness of the highest order in those who recognize that justice is a life-giving value.

## Love wears weeds of humility and gentleness

**H**UMILITY IS SOULFUL because it preserves life. It is a cardinal virtue in the Bible: “What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

Humility reflects the *deep wisdom* that “all flesh is grass.” This wisdom is deep not because it is in any sense esoteric but because it is difficult to receive. Our natural vanity makes us reluctant to see the truth about ourselves—that we are mortal. And yet the statement is incontrovertibly true and humbling.

Humility also reflects the knowledge that “all we like sheep have gone astray.” The Bible does not flatter human vanity. “Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.” “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick.” What is this sickness? It is the desire for self-glorification.

Pride is the first and most deadly sin because it brings harm to others. It led immediately to strife between Adam and Eve, and also to the first murder, when Cain slew Abel. The argument can be made that all the harm we do to others is rooted ultimately in pride and the will to dominate. “Inordinate self-love is the cause of every sin,” as a certain non-Biblical writer so concisely puts it.

If we have put ourselves out of joint with God through pride, then humility is the first step to realignment: “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.” “If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.”

The importance of humility is suggested by circumcision, the outward sign, among men, of being a Jew. This is a sign of the covenant between God and the Jews, but it is also a sign of the choice of Spirit over flesh. Moses said this: “And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.” Circumcising your heart refers to removing

pride. This is the spiritual significance of circumcision.

Jeremiah offers a similar interpretation: “Circumcise yourselves to the Lord; remove the foreskin of your hearts, O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem; lest my wrath go forth like fire, and burn with none to quench it, because of the evil of your deeds.” To circumcise our hearts is to humble ourselves. The first sin that was the cause of our unhappiness came from the desire to be like God. Circumcision signifies our willingness to repudiate this desire.

Similarly, humility is also indicated by the unleavened bread that plays such an important role in Jewish religious observance. From Wikipedia: “The biblical narrative relates that the Israelites left Egypt in such haste they could not wait for their bread dough to rise; the bread, when baked, was matzah. (Exodus 12:39). The other reason for eating matza is symbolic: On the one hand, matza symbolizes redemption and freedom, but it is also *lechem oni*, ‘poor man’s bread’. Thus it serves as a reminder to be humble, and to not forget what life was like in servitude. Also, leaven symbolizes corruption and pride as leaven ‘puffs up’. Eating the ‘bread of affliction’ is both a lesson in humility and an act that enhances the appreciation of freedom.”

The unleavened bread at Passover points to Christ, the “bread of heaven.” He was humble. He identified himself in this way: “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” He did not “count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” It is *because* he humbled himself that he was raised up and given life.

By humbling himself, he became the unleavened bread: “I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever.” He was not puffed up with the yeast of the Pharisees, which is spiritual pride. Humility in him was soulful because it led to life.

Let us put in a word for gentleness as well, a fair virtue if ever there was one. We have the following tenderhearted prophecy of the Messiah: “He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead

those that are with young.” This is not the kind of Messiah the Jews were expecting. They were hoping for a great warlord. But the prophecy puts a premium on gentleness and reminds us of just how soulful and pleasant it is.

In the same vein, here is how Christ is described when he was about to enter Jerusalem on his way to the cross: “This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying, ‘Say to the daughter of Zion, ‘Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.’”” His great gentleness is seen in the fact that he declined to enter Jerusalem as a conqueror, although this was what many of his followers wanted him to do.

Gentleness is a life-giving quality. To know someone who is gentle is to be refreshed. Paul says: “Love is patient and kind.” Thus he makes gentleness a sign of love. He also says: “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” This is a very soulful way of talking about the hidden power of gentleness.



## Humility means choosing the cross over the sword

**O**NE REASON WHY the Bible is soulful is that it chooses the cross over the sword:

For out of Zion shall go the law,  
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.  
He shall judge between the nations,  
and shall decide disputes for many peoples;  
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,  
and their spears into pruning hooks;  
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,  
neither shall they learn war anymore.

The soulfulness of this prophecy can be seen by comparing it with other ancient texts like the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*, where value is determined by the sword. The ancient world glorified the warrior class. Achilles was the hero of Greek children. The sword can provide a dominating identity, but it cannot provide a soulful identity, since its power is rooted in death. There is nothing soulful about Achilles, a shallow, vain boaster. Alexander and Hannibal and Julius Caesar can be called many things, but the word “soulful” does not come readily to mind.

Christ said this: “For all who take the sword will perish by the sword.” He did not take up the sword in his ministry of restoration. He chose to save the world through the cross. He chose the cross over the sword. The purpose of the sword is to dominate others through violence, but the cross is a symbol of laying down our lives and denying ourselves for the sake of life.

Some readers might be asking themselves at this point about God’s commands in the Old Testament to take the Promised Land by force. The Book of Joshua, for example, may appear to include an endorsement of the sword. In some circumstances the use of the sword may be justified in a just war. The Bible indicates that God used the Israelites to destroy the Canaanites because of their depravity: “It is because of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord is driving them out before you.”

For example, even before entering Canaan the Israelites were told to annihilate the Midianite camps that were close to them because

the Midianites had prostituted their daughters in an attempt to seduce them away from God and remove his favor. This was the depraved strategy openly advanced by Balaam. It was such a gross offense to God and his goodness, and posed such a grave danger to the Israelites and God's plan for the restoration of life, that the Midianites were marked for destruction.

In the Old Testament, then, the sword is sometimes enjoined in the cause of divine justice, or for self-defense, as when David battled the Philistines. But nowhere is the use of the sword justified for the sake of conquering itself or to aggrandize ourselves. And there is an inherent danger even in using the sword in a just cause. The sword of justice may in time be turned upon ourselves, since "no one is righteous—not even one." This is precisely what happened to Israel. Habakkuk and other prophets make it quite clear that Israel brought her destruction on herself.

In fact the case can be made that Israel's flirtation with the sword and just wars was an object lesson in choosing the cross over the sword. It was long after her military glory days in Canaan that Isaiah prophesied the restoration of paradise where swords are beaten into plowshares and "neither shall they learn war anymore."

Apart from just war, the Bible repudiates the sword because it represents human pridefulness, which devalues life. To conquer with the sword is to attempt to raise oneself up at the expense of others. Even today there is confusion over the idea that might makes right, as seen in our militarism as well as our action dramas and obsession with sports. "The race is not to the swift." That is because there is a more important race to be run.

The sword we have in mind can be more than just a physical weapon. It can also refer to the sword of judgment, a weapon even cowards can use to glorify themselves. Christ said this: "Judge not, that you be not judged." This is akin to saying that those who live by the sword will die by the sword. Graciousness and mercy give life, but the sword of judgment brings death, both to those who are judged and to those who are doing the judging.

The Bible is soulful because in the end it chooses mercy over judgment, the power to give life over the power to bring death, the cross over the sword.

## Soulfulness and resistance

**T**HERE HAS BEEN a great deal of hallooming in philosophical circles about “resistance” in recent decades. It is believed that resistance can provide a desirable identity by standing out against the presumed shallowness of the world and its constructs of value.

Most people don’t realize that the Bible is also very much about resistance. But the resistance it recommends is soulful because it reflects the value of life. The first thing we are told to resist is all selfish desires: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.” It is assumed that we are fallen creatures. We no longer bear the image of perfect love and immortality in which we were created. We have become selfish and vain, and our selfishness brings harm to others.

The law commands *resistance* to harmful behaviors. It is spiritual because it preserves life: “For the commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,’ and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.” This spiritual form of resistance is far more soulful than resistance for its own sake, which is meant to glorify individual beings.

Meanwhile the Bible also recommends a philosophical type of resistance to the world and its values. “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.”

“The world” refers to all manifestations of selfishness and vanity. It is what Thackeray described in his great novel as a “vanity fair.” To resist the world is to resist the emptiness of its concepts of value. This type of resistance is philosophical because it recognizes that the pride of the world is based on vanity, and is therefore nothing.

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Those who follow the path of resistance described by Christ are likely to become “sojourners and exiles” in the world, the greatest example being Christ himself: “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” It was not because of any criminal act or political cause that the world rejected him. It was because he lived a life of perfect love, thus exposing the shallowness of the world.

## Resistance leads to suffering

**C**HRIST'S RESISTANCE to the vanity of the world brought him great suffering. This suffering is soulful because it reflects the value of life.

In his own words: "These things I command you, so that you will love one another. If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours."

Those who seek to imitate him and his love will suffer as he suffered. This soulful suffering is one of the great themes of the Bible. Moses suffered. Elijah suffered. John the Baptist suffered. Christ and his apostles suffered. They suffered in part because they refused to be like the world.

Suffering is the subject of a remarkable prophecy:

He was despised and rejected by men;  
a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief;  
and as one from whom men hide their faces  
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.  
Surely he has borne our griefs  
and carried our sorrows;  
yet we esteemed him stricken,  
smitten by God, and afflicted.  
But he was pierced for our transgressions;  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,  
and with his wounds we are healed

The cross of love brings suffering in two ways. To resist the harmful desires of the flesh is to deny our own selves. Why do we steal? Because stealing seems like a shortcut to becoming rich. Why do we gossip and insult? Because we feel a desire to build ourselves

up at the expense of others. Love can cause suffering as we resist these false but highly enticing pleasures.

But taking up the cross of Christ can also cause suffering by putting us at odds with the world. Christ did not rise in the ranks of the rabbis and religious men. He resisted their vanity, their self-importance and lack of concern for the sheep, and this angered them. It was the leaders of his own religion who plotted to have him crucified, not the Roman occupiers.

His resistance to the vanity and cruelty of the world led to suffering, and this suffering makes him supremely soulful.

## Soulfulness in the Old Testament

**N**OW THAT WE'VE painted a general picture of what we have in mind when we talk about the great soulfulness of the Bible, let's dive right in and see what we can find.

It seems natural to start with the Old Testament, since it comes first. Now some may be surprised to hear there is any *soulfulness* in the Old Testament at all. There seems to be a perception that it is rather dark while the New Testament is the book of grace and light. It may be true that the bitter tends to predominate over the sweet, but there are two very good reasons for this. First, the gracious savior had not yet come; and second, the very purpose of the Old Testament is to demonstrate the need for such a savior.

Take Christ out of the world, and the light of life is gone. Death prevails. The Old Testament reflects the darkness and bitterness of life without a savior. Christ was there in the sense that there was light in the Word—in the Old Testament itself—in the law and the prophets, which are rooted in love and the value of life—but the Bible is unsparing about human beings and human nature. Life without a savior is dark and unpleasant.

At the same time the Old Testament also demonstrates that we *need* a savior. We fall short of the glory of God and cannot give ourselves life. Paul makes a very interesting observation: “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.” What does this mean? There have been many explanations, such as the existence of a stable empire with good roads and koine Greek for the Gospel to spread and even the development of vellum.

But it may also mean that the world was not *ready* for a savior until the time of Christ. This was because of human pride. In the Bible, pride was the cause of the first sin and also at the root of all subsequent sin. The Israelites were a “stiff-necked people.” Just as their depravity had to become self-evident in the Desert of Sin before Joshua could bring them over to the Promised Land, so their inability to save themselves had to be revealed in history before they could appreciate Jesus, a very different kind of Yeshua.

The Old Testament is the record of this unveiling process, which partly accounts for its bitter quality. Israel was chosen by God to be the vessel of salvation, but Israel was comprised of very fallible men who were incapable of bringing salvation themselves. The best time in her history was probably under the leadership of the judges. Joshua was admirable, if bloody. Samson was a strange and violent character. His story suggests the futility of entrusting our salvation to warriors with Achilles-like powers. Then came the kings. The greatest was David, who reigned in triumph until he sinned. After that his kingdom descended into chaos and darkness.

The Old Testament begins in pure sweetness. God made the heavens and the earth and saw that it was “very good.” He created man and breathed into him the Spirit of life, his soul. He gave him dominion over the earth and the God-like power to name things, to value them. He took a rib from him and created woman, XX from XY, leading to the greatest declaration of love in all literature: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.”

So pure was their happiness that “the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.” They were not ashamed because they were innocent. Also their identity was commensurate in their own minds with the value of life, the “light of men.” But then they rebelled against God and lost this happy identity. They became mortal and tasted the bitterness of excessive self-love in created beings. “Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life.”

They were given just one rule to follow and failed. They should not have failed. The forbidden fruit was no more desirable as fruit than any other in the garden. What tempted them was the vain thought of becoming like God. They did become like God in one sense: by sinning, they obtained the knowledge of good *and* evil, while before they had known only good. But they also became very unlike him—because they became mortal.

God was angry at their vanity and unfaithfulness, but even in his anger he made a hope-filled promise: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” A savior would come from the fallen race of Eve. Satan and darkness and death would prevail for a time, but the savior would bring light back into the world and crush the serpent’s head.



After the fall, human existence became so depraved that God was moved to send the Flood to wash the face of the earth clean. But then came a new promise and a new order of sweetness: “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh. And the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.”

The rainbow was the beginning of the bittersweet quality of the Bible, and thus of its soulfulness. It was an entirely new kind of covering. It signified a promise by God not to destroy human life in spite of its wickedness. The wickedness was not removed, or the bitterness it caused; men continued to sin and to incur the wrath of God. But God looked down on humankind through rose-colored glasses by means of the rainbow. Bitterness was alleviated to some degree by the sweetness of the promise, giving the Old Testament its bittersweet quality, its soulfulness.

God’s graciousness is reflected in the rainbow, which changed the relationship between humankind and himself. But what did this gaily-colored promise actually signify? We begin to find out in the story of Abraham and Sarah, old and childless. It was considered disgraceful to be childless in the ancient world, since procreation was seen as the means of perpetuating oneself and one’s legacy.

The light of life had long since gone out by the time Abraham and Sarah received their three mysterious visitors. Who were these visitors? According to St. Augustine, they were the triune God, based on the following verse: “And the Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre.” If so, then something very soulful and deep is going on. The triune God will have made three appearances in the Bible: in the beginning, at creation and the transmission of life; at the promise of restoration to Abraham; and much later at the baptism of Christ, which marks the beginning of his ministry of restoration.

The light of life could not be restored in them by natural means. They were far too old. God restored life by promising them a son. Of course the son that was promised could not restore life in

himself. Isaac was mortal. But there was incomparable sweetness hidden in the promise given to Abraham. He was to become the father of “many nations.” Through Isaac and his descendants a savior would be born who would give life not just to Abraham’s direct descendants but to everyone.

This foreshadowing took on a specific character when Abraham was commanded by God to take his beloved son to the altar. The story intimates an unimaginable sweetness when Abraham’s hand is stayed and a ram is provided. This gesture was sweet on its own terms, since it spared Isaac, and it prefigured the system of ritual sacrifice that came into being to give humankind relief from their sins. But the story becomes impossibly sweet when we realize that the ram foreshadows Christ, the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

Indeed, the concept of *foreshadowing* is the key to unlocking much of the soulfulness of the Old Testament. There is great soulfulness, for example, in the fact that God liberated the nation of Israel from slavery in Egypt—liberation is soulful for its own sake—“let my people go”—but the story becomes deeply soulful when we think of it as a foreshadowing of Christ, who liberates us from the grave.

The book of Exodus recounts many Israelite experiences that foreshadow Christ. We have already discussed the rock in the desert, which looks forward to Christ on the cross. While they were still in Egypt, the Israelites were told to paint their doorposts with the blood of a “lamb without blemish” in order to ward off the angel of death. This looks forward most soulfully to Christ, by whose innocent blood we are redeemed.

When the Israelites were attacked by snakes in the desert, an image of a snake was lifted up on a staff. All who looked up at it were saved, just as Christ was lifted up on the cross. “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” The Israelites were separated from the Promised Land by the Jordan River in the same way that we are separated from paradise by the river of death. They were afraid to cross the river because of what was on the other side, just as we fear death and nothingness.

Soulfulness is bittersweet, and foreshadowing intensifies this quality in the Old Testament by invoking the surpassing sweetness to come. There is sweetness in knowing God provided protection to the Israelites by having them paint blood on their door frames; but this sweetness is magnified when we realize that it points to Christ,

who shed his own blood to restore life.

Moses embodied a very soulful Biblical principle: “Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.” He “was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth.” God does not choose those who are proud to do his good work. He chooses the meek and the lowly. This shows his sovereignty. It also shows his soulful nature. He favors gentleness and kindness and self-knowledge.

Moses was an old man in exile by the time God appeared to him in the burning bush and called him to lead his people. No longer was he the princely firebrand who had killed the Egyptian overseer. He was also “slow of speech.” He was a shepherd who knew his limitations and did not feel worthy to lead the people of Israel in a perilous undertaking; and perhaps for this very reason God raised him up.

God raises up the meek and lowly and casts down the mighty from their thrones. This uniquely Biblical idea is soulful because it indicates that God honors those who do not lord it over others, who value life. It is also soulful because it shows that God takes the side of the meek and the lowly when they put their faith in him.

Something similar can be seen when the prophet Samuel goes to Jesse looking for the man that God has chosen to succeed Saul as king. Jesse paraded his fine sons before the prophet, but they would not do. Finally David was brought in. He had been out in the fields, tending sheep. He was the last and least of Jesse’s sons—but he was the one who was chosen.

Shepherding can be seen in two ways. To the poetic mind, the shepherd seemed closer to the Golden Age than the rest of us. His tender care for the sheep; the simplicity and honesty of his calling; the bucolic setting of his existence—all these combined to make him a soulful object of interest. These attributes are seen in David’s most beloved poem. God is our shepherd and has a tender relation to the sheep. Christ took up this image for himself. “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

But the way the poets saw David’s humble occupation was not always the way the world saw it. Shepherds were among the least and lowest of laborers, owning no land or business of their own. In Egypt, they were said to be “despised.” In Israel they were not permitted to give testimony in court. The choice of David to be Israel’s king illustrates the principle that “the last will be first, and

the first last.” His lowliness made him the right instrument for God’s purposes. It also looks forward to the birth of Christ, which was announced to the shepherds in the fields.

David became Israel’s greatest king because he was “a man after [God’s] own heart,” as seen in the great love and faithfulness to God that he expressed in his songs, his concern for justice and the oppressed, and even in his unwillingness to kill Saul when he had the opportunity. Unfortunately he forgot about justice at one point in his career, committing adultery with Bathsheba and having her husband murdered to cover it up—but it was after his fall from grace that his story became deeply soulful and bittersweet.

This great soulfulness is found, for example, in the death of his son Absalom, who tried to steal the kingdom from him and forced him to flee from Jerusalem. There was a battle, and Absalom was slain. “And the king was deeply moved and went up to the chamber over the gate and wept. And as he went, he said, ‘O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!’”

It was after David sinned that he wrote some of his most soulful songs. This is because the highest form of soulfulness is typically bittersweet. He had to be broken by his own sinfulness before he could write that “The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.” He had to suffer before he could understand the soulfulness of suffering: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!”

David’s sorrow looks forward to one of Christ’s Beatitudes: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” This does not just refer to those who mourn for loved ones they have lost. It also refers to mourning for our sins, which is an important concept in the Bible and the key to its soulfulness. The way to blessing is through sorrow and tears. Only when we mourn can we truly taste the sweetness of God.

David’s life can be thought of as a microcosm of the Old Testament, which demonstrates how much we need a savior. He began in strength, full of love for the Lord, but was crushed by his own sinfulness. We do not see him dancing in triumph after he sinned, as he did when he retrieved the Ark from the Philistines; and yet it is in this broken state that the Lord is closest. Perhaps our self-

centered ambitions and dreams have to be crushed before we can fully appreciate his loving kindness.

David's last testament is deeply moving. There are many depictions of kings and rulers in the poems and plays and histories of Greece and Rome, but there is nothing that can match the following words from David for sheer soulfulness: "The God of Israel has spoken; the Rock of Israel has said to me: When one rules justly over men, ruling in the fear of God, he dawns on them like the morning light, like the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning, like rain that makes grass to sprout from the earth."

For David, justice is the sign of greatness in a king. This is by no means obvious. From the non-Biblical view, it appears that a king must be a good warlord. Those were the leaders whom the historians glorified most—the Alexanders and Julius Caesars. But to David, a king must be just. As discussed, justice is one of the most soulful virtues known to humankind because it is rooted in the value of life.

The meaning of the next sentence is in some dispute among the translators. For the sake of soulfulness, try the King James version, which has this: "Although my house be not so with God, yet he hath made with me an everlasting covenant." In this reading, the sins committed during David's reign make it impossible for him to claim to have ruled with perfect justice—and yet God has made the covenant with him that leads to Christ.

## Many kinds of bondage

**A**N IMPORTANT ASPECT of the soulfulness of the Old Testament is the notion of our slavery to sin, which is unique to the Bible. The Israelites were set free from Egypt but not from their own rebelliousness. They continued to be slaves to sin even after liberation—and yet they were ushered into the Promised Land. This looks forward to our own situation. We may have been liberated from the grave but not from our own limitations. And yet we are saved by faith and God’s grace.

Why is this worldview soulful? Because it sips the full bitterness of human depravity, thus making God’s graciousness seem all the more sweet. Only the Bible does either of these. With regard to depravity, we are said to live in “bondage to corruption.” This means bondage of the will. Adam and Eve sinned as well, but the choice they made was entirely free. Not us. We live in bondage because we are mortals with immortal longings.

We are slaves to the grave in the sense that every sin is rooted in the desire to overcome it. We may not be consciously aware of this bondage, but it is real. We may love the law in our innermost being, as St. Paul says—the same law that is rooted in love—and yet our bondage to the grave can cause us to do the very thing we do not want to do. We can make up our mind to do right and still do wrong. When the will is deprived of the power to do what it wants, what it knows to be right, that is bondage.

This bondage was seen in the Exodus story. The Israelites were liberated from Egypt, but they were far from being free: “And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, and the people of Israel said to them, ‘Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.’”

They were free from Egypt but not from the flesh pots of Egypt. They were free from cruel Egyptian overlords but not from the self-

inflicted bitterness of their own rebellious spirits. If they were truly free, they would have been like John the Baptist, happy to live in the wilderness on locusts and wild honey, happy with nothing more than the presence of God. This is true freedom. It was not what was seen in the Israelites—or in most of us today.

They were a “stiff-necked people.” To be stiff-necked is to be proud. It indicates the rebellion of mortal flesh against immortal Spirit, the very first sin. They showed their rebelliousness again and again, most egregiously when they made the golden calf and engaged in lewd practices. It was not because of their holiness that they entered the Promised Land. It was because God pulled them over to the other side and delivered the land into their hands.

The Bible makes this perfectly clear. It is not in any sense about the holiness of mortals but about the sweetness and graciousness of God. It does nothing whatsoever to sugarcoat the depravity of the very nation that is described as having been chosen as the vessel of salvation. It is this almost brutal honesty that accounts for much of its soulfulness.

But the story also points to something beyond Israel. We are just like the Israelites. We do not deserve eternal life today any more than they deserved to inherit the Promised Land. We too are trapped on the desert side of the river, the desert of sin. And yet God has made a watery way for us through the cross. It is the cross that enables us to cross over the river of death and not anything we ourselves have done.

We are like the Israelites, always wandering off, despising in our thoughts, words and deeds the great kindness that has been shown to us; and God is always coming to save us, a tenderhearted Father who cannot stop himself from showing kindness to his wayward children. The Bible is soulful because it is honest about the bitterness of human existence—and at the same time it does not take anything away from God and the sweetness of his love.

The book of Hosea shows that the Jews were fully aware of this soulful combination of depravity and grace. It begins in startling fashion with God commanding the prophet to marry Gomer, a prostitute. This signifies God’s covenant relationship with Israel, which has been unfaithful. Gomer goes off with other men, but Hosea pursues her and brings her back. This signifies God’s steadfast love to Israel down through the ages.

God’s comment: “Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk; I

took them up by their arms, but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of kindness, with the bands of love, and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws, and I bent down to them and fed them.” There could be no more tender depiction of God and his relationship to his people. Certainly there is nothing like it in any other ancient text. But after all that they betrayed him and ran after other gods.

God in his wrath wanted to destroy them. But then he relents: “How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my burning anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.”

God is *different* from men. He is the Holy One among us; in this context, it is his transcendent graciousness that makes him holy and sets him apart. Israel deserves judgment, but God cannot bring himself to destroy his people. They are worthy of his wrath, but his love for them is greater than their transgression. The relationship is bittersweet not just from the human point of view but from God’s as well! He is willing to suffer because of his great love.

“Hosea” means “he saves.” God wants to save them in spite of themselves. They are unfaithful to him and continually abuse his kindness—and still he wants to save them. God is passionate about his people. He suffers for their sake even when they are the cause of his suffering. Hosea looks forward to Christ and his suffering, which is soulful in exactly the same way.

A word about the term “chosen people.” The designation is not meant to glorify the Israelites. Moses makes this perfectly clear: “Know, therefore, that the Lord your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stubborn people. Remember and do not forget how you provoked the Lord your God to wrath in the wilderness. From the day you came out of the land of Egypt until you came to this place, you have been rebellious against the Lord.”

They were not “chosen” because they were righteous. They were chosen because Abraham believed. They were chosen by faith and not by works, since it was not possible for Abraham to give himself a son and perpetuate the race by his own virtue. They were chosen to glorify God and not themselves.



Specifically, they were chosen to be the vessel through which salvation would come to all humankind—in spite of themselves. The Old Testament makes no bones about their depravity. They did not give themselves the law, the glory of Israel; it came directly from God. They cannot take credit for the prophets, who came specifically to rail against their depravity, and who for this reason were abused by them.

The notion of a chosen people is intended to glorify God alone. It is soulful, not because it singles out the Israelites, but because it shows the supreme graciousness of God.

## Lamentations

**T**HIS BONDAGE OF the will leads to tears and frustration. Indeed, there is an entire book devoted to tears in the Old Testament—Lamentations.

We have talked about the bittersweet quality of soulfulness. There is no book more bitter in all literature than Lamentations. It is one long, sorrowful wail from beginning to end:

How lonely sits the city  
that was full of people!  
How like a widow has she become,  
she who was great among the nations!  
She who was a princess among the provinces  
has become a slave.  
She weeps bitterly in the night,  
with tears on her cheeks;  
among all her lovers  
she has none to comfort her;  
all her friends have dealt treacherously with her;  
they have become her enemies.

Israel was at one time a gem among the nations. We can get a sense of this from the description of Solomon and his reign. She was prosperous, she was luxurious, she was well-fed. But perhaps too well-fed, because Israel forgot about God. She made “lovers” among pagan nations and worshipped their cruel gods. She forgot about justice and mercy. She forgot about the poor. She became proud, and thus depraved, and for her depravity she was punished.

We know of no more bitter lament than the following:

The elders of the daughter of Zion  
sit on the ground in silence;  
they have thrown dust on their heads  
and put on sackcloth;  
the young women of Jerusalem  
have bowed their heads to the ground.  
My eyes are spent with weeping;  
my stomach churns;  
my bile is poured out to the ground

## THE MOST SOULFUL BOOK

because of the destruction of the daughter of my people,  
because infants and babies faint  
in the streets of the city.  
They cry to their mothers,  
“Where is bread and wine?”  
as they faint like a wounded man  
in the streets of the city,  
as their life is poured out  
on their mothers’ bosom.

There is worse than this, much worse, but we cannot bear to repeat it. What is the reason for this desolation? The prophet lays the blame on the afflicted: “Jerusalem sinned grievously; therefore she became filthy; all who honored her despise her, for they have seen her nakedness; she herself groans and turns her face away.”

If the Old Testament is a dark book, it is because it shows the depravity of the human condition. It is an honest mirror. It does not offer excuses. It does not pretend that the sorrows of Israel are on account of her enemies. No, her greatest enemy is herself. She cannot be the nation she so desperately wants to be. She cannot be a shining light among the nations because she too is in bondage to the grave and cannot do the good she wants to do.

“He has made my flesh and my skin waste away; he has broken my bones; he has besieged and enveloped me with bitterness and tribulation; he has made me dwell in darkness like the dead of long ago.” What is this bitterness? It is nothingness. Israel, once high and mighty, has been brought down low. Our consciousness of the value of life makes us feel our nothingness acutely.

She has been brought down so low that she has been reduced to tears: “All our enemies open their mouths against us; panic and pitfall have come upon us, devastation and destruction; my eyes flow with rivers of tears because of the destruction of the daughter of my people. My eyes will flow without ceasing, without respite, until the Lord from heaven looks down and sees; my eyes cause me grief at the fate of all the daughters of my city.”

Her tears are a portal to overwhelming soulfulness, however. It is when pride is broken and drowning in tears—it is just at that point that we can truly taste the sweetness of God:

My soul continually remembers it  
and is bowed down within me.  
But this I call to mind,  
and therefore I have hope:  
The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases;

JAY TROTT

his mercies never come to an end;  
they are new every morning;  
great is your faithfulness.  
“The Lord is my portion,” says my soul,  
“therefore I will hope in him.”  
The Lord is good to those who wait for him,  
to the soul who seeks him.

If God’s mercies are new every morning, then yesterday’s sins can be forgiven. Life can begin again, become new. The writer of Lamentations looks forward to Christ in this deeply soulful verse. Through his sacrifice life can become new every morning. The bitter and the sweet come together in full force like tidal waters.

## The prophets

**S**OULFULNESS IN THE Old Testament prophets, you say? Isaiah, Jeremiah—those fire-brands?

Actually they are very soulful. There is great tenderness in the prophets. There is even some soulfulness to be found in their fire, when properly understood. After all, *why* was God angry with his chosen people? It was because of their lack of charity and love. God's wrath is rooted in his perfect love.

Here is how he describes himself: "The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, 'The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.'"

First of all, God is merciful and gracious. "God is love" in the Old Testament as well as the New. At the same time, God "will by no means clear the guilty." Who are the guilty? In the prophets, they include idolaters and moral offenders—but mostly they are those who cheat the poor and pervert justice.

Isaiah makes the soulfulness of God's wrath evident with a formidable blast: "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations—I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly."

God was angry with the Israelites for perverting religion, for depriving it of soulfulness by continuing to do damage to others even while they made their ritual sacrifices. Later in Isaiah we also see that they were using religion to make themselves seem holy. They did not understand the significance of fasting, which was to humble

themselves.

If they want to please God, then Isaiah tells them very plainly what they must do: “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.” To please God is to love one's neighbors and seek to build up life through charity and justice. To please God is to be soulful.

The passion of the prophets for charity and justice does not always seem to be embraced in our churches today or made a focal point of our collective thought-life. And yet Isaiah contains one of the most soulful promises in all literature:

“If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday. And the Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in scorched places and make your bones strong; you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail. And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in.”

Maybe we should consider taking such passages more seriously, in spite of the seeming darkness of the Old Testament. A church that looked like this would fill the ever-growing need in modern life for soulfulness, the thirst that is not being satisfied anywhere else.

What is it specifically that has the Lord riled up? Amos tells us: “Hear this, you who trample on the needy and bring the poor of the land to an end, saying, ‘When will the new moon be over, that we may sell grain? And the Sabbath, that we may offer wheat for sale, that we may make the ephah small and the shekel great and deal deceitfully with false balances, that we may buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals and sell the chaff of the wheat?’ The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: ‘Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.’”

People were taking advantage of the poor. That's why the Lord was angry. In short, God's wrath is a good deal more soulful than we might realize. But of course there is much more to the prophets than wrath. They prophesy a terrible judgment for Israel because of her selfishness—and yet God will not let her sins destroy her. The

beautiful promise is still in force. His love is stronger than her depravity. He is going to do something for Israel and for the whole human race that is too wonderful to comprehend. He will send his own son to redeem her.

To this end, those fiery prophets also gave us the most tender promises of love and consolation found anywhere. “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.” Other religions have gods who punish sins, but no other religion has a God who speaks with such soulful sweetness.

The prophecies of the Messiah are wildly soulful: “For he grew up before him like a young plant.” He will not come in wrath but in tenderness. “He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.” Outward beauty can be a great liar and cruel judgment in the world, but his beauty will be inward. “He was despised and rejected by men.” He will not be one of the inner circle, the usual power-brokers.

He is “a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.” Think of all the forced laughing seen on late-night TV—he will be the opposite of that. “He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.” He will suffer to pay for our sins. “He opened not his mouth.” He will put his faith in God and not the tongue, that devious little muscle.

He is the counterintuitive Messiah. The people of Israel were looking for a warrior-savior to come and free them from their oppressors—someone like David, who conquered the Philistines. And in fact a warrior-king is the first thing men naturally hope for in a savior. We want him to justify our existence at the expense of our enemies. The heroes of Greece and Rome were warriors. It was the conquerors who were given the parade of triumph, not the sages or the peacemakers.

Isaiah paints a very different picture of the Messiah, however. “He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.” The counterintuitive Messiah will be humble, not a warrior full of boasts and taunts. He is so gentle that he will not even break a bruised reed. He also brings forth justice, which is something no warrior can

promise by fighting on the battlefield.

More: “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to grant to those who mourn in Zion—to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified.”

He will not come to destroy but to bind up. He will not come to seek riches for himself, like earthy kings, but to preach the good news to the poor. He will not come to enslave nations but to proclaim liberty to the captives. He will not come to bring death to one’s presumed enemies but to give his own life. “Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.”

The counterintuitive Messiah is also soulful for the very reason that he is counterintuitive. That is, he is not obvious. He embodies a hidden wisdom that is not like the wisdom of the world, which leads to destruction. He is soulful because this hidden wisdom is based on the restoration power of love, which builds up life. Every aspect of the prophecies exhibits this great love.

The soulfulness of this love is seen in Ezekiel’s vision of a valley filled with dry bones. God knits the bones back together and puts flesh on them. “And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the Lord.”

These thrilling words pointed to the restoration of Israel after the Babylonian captivity, but they also have a wider meaning. A Messiah is going to come to give “abundant life.” Those who love God may feel like dry bones from time to time, crushed under the weight of their sins or the pain of existence, but no matter how deep their



valley may be there is still the possibility of restoration. Christ comes to believers when they turn to him and knits them back together in their hearts and minds.

It occurs to us that the deep soulfulness of Ezekiel's vision may not be readily apparent. Soulfulness is universally appealing and provides great pleasure to the tenderhearted, but passages like the valley of dry bones may benefit from some elucidation. It helps if the reader can connect directly to the prophecy and understand that it refers to his or her own life and the lives of people we love. Soulfulness comes into view as we realize this strange vision is really about the restoration of life—and the dry bones are our own.

In the same vein, here is a very soulful restoration promise from the prophet Jeremiah: "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: 'Once more they shall use these words in the land of Judah and in its cities, when I restore their fortunes: "The Lord bless you, O habitation of righteousness, O holy hill!" And Judah and all its cities shall dwell there together, and the farmers and those who wander with their flocks. For I will satisfy the weary soul, and every languishing soul I will replenish."

After repentance and sorrow come mercy and renewal for the soul. God releases us from our captivity to the grave. We will be farmers and shepherds. This was literally true for the Israelites of Jeremiah's time after their liberation from the "northern countries," but to us it is a picture of peace and contentment. Farming and shepherding, to the poetic imagination, are soulful occupations. We may not be farmers and shepherds in our corporation jobs, but we can be these things in our minds when we are renewed.

Another soulful theme of the prophets is the picture of God as a great leveler of the playing field of life: "Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord God is an everlasting rock. For he has humbled the inhabitants of the height, the lofty city. He lays it low, lays it low to the ground, casts it to the dust. The foot tramples it, the feet of the poor, the steps of the needy." Or again, even more poetically: "Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain."

God takes up the cause of the lowly, the oppressed, the poor, the outcasts, the common people. Christ himself was oppressed. This is supremely soulful for two reasons. First, such passages repudiate those who rise in the world at the expense of others. Second, they encourage the poor and the oppressed.

## Wisdom is soulful

**I**T IS WIDELY RECOGNIZED that wisdom is soulful. To obtain wisdom is to obtain a deep understanding of what is good and what can bring joy and peace. Even in our frivolous culture there is some residual respect for wisdom and depth.

The wisdom books found in the Bible are uniquely soulful because they root wisdom in the value of life. Wisdom in the Bible is a matter of knowing, first of all, that life is our highest value, and also that “all flesh is grass.” It is the confluence of these two ideas that makes those wisdom books especially soulful.

The Bible holds wisdom in high regard: “Blessed is the one who finds wisdom, and the one who gets understanding, for the gain from her is better than gain from silver and her profit better than gold. She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace.”

These sentences are deeply soulful because they link wisdom to life. Again, this valuation is unique to the Bible. It does not view wisdom as a competition or require us to scale any mountains or separate ourselves from the disheveled masses by dint of will or intellect. No, wisdom is valuable because its “ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace.” Wisdom leads to life. In the Bible, wisdom is an egalitarian value.

There are several wisdom books in the Old Testament, each offering its own distinct flavor of soulfulness. The most obvious is Proverbs, which is quoted above. Wisdom is the self-proclaimed star of Proverbs, but here is something worth noting: Proverbs is a plain-spoken book. Wisdom in other traditions is often esoteric, hard to understand; see the Upanishads. But Proverbs offers a different kind of wisdom. It is wisdom for everyday life.

Proverbs shows us how to lead a good life. This is not wisdom for the monks who turn away from the world, or for philosophers debating in their schools. It is wisdom for the rest of us. As Christ said: “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed

them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.”

Here is an excellent example of the confounding simplicity of Proverbs: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” This simple-seeming sentiment is profoundly, even cosmologically true, since the first sin was pride. Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit because they forgot to fear God and his warning that they would surely die. They lost their fear when they forgot they were made of dust and thought they could become like God.

Hence the beginning of wisdom is to restore this holy fear. To eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is to know the perverse thrill of doing evil, doing things that bring harm, since we already know what is good. But this is insanity if the thing we value most is life. The fear of the Lord restores us to our right minds and restores wisdom by reminding us that we are mortal. It is the fear of death that makes us fear God, the giver of life.

Adam and Eve were told there would be consequences if they ate the forbidden fruit. In the same way, we have been told there will be consequences if we do not love the Lord God with all our hearts and souls and minds and our neighbors as ourselves. To fear those consequences is to be wise because it can lead to life. Those who violate the rule of love will find themselves suffering in ways they could not have imagined.

The fear of the Lord is *necessary* in order to see the wisdom of Proverbs. “My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent.” This is not what the world calls “wisdom.” It is not the sort of thing you will find in Plato or Aristotle. It is far too mundane. But it is wise by the measure of life. It is wisdom to those who fear the Lord and understand that the “wages of sin is death.”

“Do not plan evil against your neighbor, who dwells trustingly beside you. Do not contend with a man for no reason, when he has done you no harm.” Again, these simple-seeming precepts conceal deep wisdom. There is a hidden force in the human psyche, a hidden bondage, which is the desire to be preferred to our neighbor. This desire leads to destruction.

Proverbs is full of advice like this, and there can be no question that it is precious. It is perfectly sweet by the measure of life—and yet there is also a bitter quality to Proverbs, because this excellent advice will not necessarily be heeded. “Wisdom cries aloud in the street, in the markets she raises her voice; at the head of the noisy streets she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks.” She

cries aloud because no one is listening.

This is a soulful picture of Wisdom. She is full of a tender love for the very people who are not listening to her. She is not sitting in a temple somewhere, enshrined in marble. She is not waiting for us to come and worship her. She does not want to be worshipped. She wants to help us, even when we are inclined to ignore her. She is concerned for our welfare.

“For whoever finds me finds life and obtains favor from the Lord, but he who fails to find me injures himself; all who hate me love death.” Who loves death? We all do, according to the Bible. Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit even though they were told they would surely die. Vanity caused them to love death—in their actions if not in their conscious minds. Every sin we commit is a sign of our unconscious love of death.

Solomon himself, traditionally the author of Proverbs, did not always act wisely. He gave us the following excellent advice: “For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching a light, and the reproofs of discipline are the way of life, to preserve you from the evil woman, from the smooth tongue of the adulteress. Do not desire her beauty in your heart, and do not let her capture you with her eyelashes.”

He repeated this advice often, which probably should be a red flag in itself. Of all the excellent and wise advice he gave, this may have been the hardest for him to follow, since he boasted of having 700 wives and 300 concubines. It was the wives and concubines that led to his downfall. Some of them believed in false gods, and he built altars to those gods, which was the main thing God had warned him about from the beginning.

Here is some more good advice from Solomon: “Blessings are on the head of the righteous, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence.” Again: “A man who is kind benefits himself, but a cruel man hurts himself.” Fine words indeed, and true wisdom; pure, sweet words full of the Spirit of life. But is this the same Solomon who wiped out whole towns for their wealth and put people into slavery in order to imitate the pharaohs and build lavish palaces?

The Queen of Sheba assured Solomon that the reports she received of his wisdom were true, but he himself had doubts in the end, as seen in Ecclesiastes. This is a deeply soulful book because it illustrates the truth of Christ’s saying, “For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?” It is a renunciation of the world by a man who had gained it all. “Vanity of vanities! All is

vanity.”

Solomon was the original superman. “I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem.”

He accomplished all this, and obtained a reputation for wisdom as well, but was he content? Not at all. “Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.” Why? “For of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise dies just like the fool!” It does not matter how much we build ourselves up in the world; death is the great leveler and will not allow us to be at peace without God.

The soulfulness of Ecclesiastes comes, first, from the fact that he correctly identifies life as the light of men. He is despondent in spite of his great successes because they cannot give him life. The famous “seasons” litany is meant to illustrate this: “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die”—etc. The too-familiar seasons of life have become a source of inexpressible weariness to him. They lose their incandescence as we come to realize that “all is vanity.”

Ecclesiastes is soulful because it acknowledges that success in the world cannot give us the one thing we desire most. “Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man’s envy of his neighbor. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.” Why do we strive for success? According to Ecclesiastes, it is because we are trying to compare ourselves favorably with our neighbor. This is vanity in the literal sense, but it is also vanity in the figurative sense, since it is impossible to obtain the immortal identity that we desire through such comparisons.

What did Solomon learn from all his striving? “There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?” And our personal favorite: “Sweet is the sleep of a laborer, whether he eats

little or much, but the full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep.” In sum, work hard, live cleanly, be content with what God has given you, and most of all stay humble.

Before we leave Solomon, here is a piece of advice that we have found particularly useful: “It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand, for the one who fears God shall come out from both of them.” Or as a more modern translation would have it: “It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other. Whoever fears God will avoid all extremes.” (NIV)

In most cases our self-glorifying judgments simply reinforce dumb luck. We are born Republicans or Democrats, Catholics or Protestants, Americans or Russians, and use intellect after the fact to make these identities seem more valuable than they really are. Better by far to “hold onto the one without letting go of the other”; not just to see and acknowledge the truth in our own point of view but also to stretch ourselves and see the truth and value in opposing points of view. But not an easy thing to do by any means.

The dividing effects of intellect can be seen in the story of Job. He was “blameless and upright, one who feared God, and turned away from evil.” By his own account, he lived the way Proverbs recommends long before Proverbs was written. And yet he lost everything, his children and possessions, even his health, when God allowed Satan to test him. Job was trying to find wisdom—understanding that brings peace—in the midst of his calamity.

Job is a soulful book for many reasons, one of them being his searing speeches: “Why is light given to him who is in misery, and life to the bitter in soul, who long for death, but it comes not, and dig for it more than for hidden treasures, who rejoice exceedingly and are glad when they find the grave. Why is light given to a man whose way is hidden, whom God has hedged in? For my sighing comes instead of my bread, and my groanings are poured out like water. For the thing that I fear comes upon me, and what I dread befalls me. I am not at ease, nor am I quiet; I have no rest, but trouble comes.”

Hamlet and Macbeth offer excellent examples of this kind of soulful lament, but Job sets the standard. To read Job is to be reminded that the Bible is not just a sacred book but also incomparably great literature. The soulfulness of his lament comes from its bitterness. The sweetness of wisdom was still far off.

What was not so far off, alas, was the three friends who came to

offer him their consolation. In his suffering, Job had begun to question the justice of God. They came to show him why he was wrong. Their strategy was to explain why bad things happen to good people, a branch of speculation known as theodicy. But they could not console him or give him the peace he was looking for.

They were not really trying to console Job. They were trying to console themselves. Job was questioning the justice of God, and by implication the goodness of God. As believers, they perceived this as a threat to their identities; so they took up the sword of intellect in an attempt to snuff out the doubts of this most-respected man.

Their failure to console him had nothing to do with a lack of competence. Their arguments were the best the world has to offer, not just then but still today. There is nothing being written or said in our own time on the subject of theodicy that was not said by Job's interlocutors long ago, usually better or more persuasively, or at least with more precision.

But the problem is that intellect is a dividing power, not a healing power. When intellect looks at the problem of theodicy it is naturally divided in three ways. First is Pollyannaism. Job must be mistaken. Everything is fine. The second is negation. Job claimed to be a good man but in fact no one is good. God's justice is not called into question by his calamity because all men are sinners and deserve God's judgment. And finally there is negotiation. Both of the other viewpoints are right and both also are wrong. Wisdom is found in the middle ground.

The problem with these excellent argument strategies is they do not "take hold of the one without letting go of the other." Intellect cannot justify God because God is not intellect. The force of intellect is judgment, but judgment is a dividing power, a sword; and mortals are strongly inclined to use this sword to justify their notions about things. Job's friends were trying to make themselves feel better about his calamity and the troubling questions it raised.

They could not console him with their bromides because he was beyond consolation, just as we cannot console anyone who has lost someone dear. Job did not find consolation until he walked away from his friends and encountered God in a storm. Suddenly he became aware of the majesty of God—and the smallness of man and his notions of divine justice: "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched

the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?”

Job and his friends had been sitting there talking about things they could not even begin to comprehend. They had been talking about the justice of God as if they were capable of seeing beyond their own smallness and limitations. They could talk all they wanted and not make the smallest dent in the universe. All that mattered was this: “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.”



## Love poetry as well!

**T**HERE IS A STRANGE and wonderful little book planted in the midst of the Old Testament called the Songs of Songs. It is, of all things, a love poem, very romantic; or as some unromantic commentators would have it, “erotic.”

It is amongst the greatest love poems ever written, unsurpassed in its imaginative strangeness and sweetness. Its strangeness does not come from the pain of unrequited love, as is the case with many love poems, but from the strangeness of love itself. And it is a deeply soulful book, first because romantic love is soulful, next because love in a fallen world is both bitter and sweet, and perhaps most of all because it can also be read as a description of Christ and his bride, the church.

Romantic love is the source of our greatest joys and can also invite our greatest sorrows. There can be no question about its power, but there are questions about where its power may be leading us. The Song of Songs is a rebuke to those who oppose or discount it. They include stout fellows of a puritanical cast and others who take delight in debunking the joys of the masses.

If nothing else, the Song of Songs affirms that romantic love is real and no illusion, no mere social construct, and does so in the most emphatic terms: “Sustain me with raisins; refresh me with apples, for I am sick with love.” It contains some of the most delightful love-poem imagery found anywhere:

My beloved is to me a satchet of myrrh  
that lies between my breasts.  
My beloved is to me a cluster of henna blossoms  
in the vineyards of Engedi.  
Behold, you are beautiful, my love;  
behold, you are beautiful;  
your eyes are doves.

Great love poetry summons the sweetness of love through metaphor or allusion. The use of this technique reaches a level of excellence in the Song of Songs that has never been surpassed. But the poem also has something that is rarely seen in love poetry—it

captures the strangeness of romantic love as well, its unknown provenance, its power to produce both bliss and sorrow, which makes it bittersweet. Here is an example of this strangeness:

The voice of my beloved!  
Behold, he comes,  
leaping over the mountains,  
bounding over the hills.  
My beloved is like a gazelle  
or a young stag.  
Behold, there he stands  
behind our wall,  
gazing through the windows,  
looking through the lattice.

This image of the gazelle as lover suggests grace and beauty and strength, but it is also strange, surreal, and becomes even stranger when the gazelle-lover peers at the beloved through her window. Here is this strangeness connected to sorrow:

I sought him, but found him not;  
I called him, but he gave no answer.  
The watchmen found me,  
as they went about in the city;  
they beat me, they bruised me,  
they took away my veil.

In this case romantic attachment leads to a beating. The reason for the beating is not explained, perhaps because the sorrows of love are considered to be beyond the pale of reason.

The beloved has a dream where she goes out into the streets looking for her lover. The first time she has this dream she finds him and brings him to her mother's house. This is a depiction of the joys of romantic love and the desire to share him with her family. The second time she has the dream, however, the watchmen of the city beat her. It is almost as if she were telling herself that her wonderful dream of love could not be real.

Which leads to the following interesting comment: "I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the does of the field, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases." The beloved says this three times. On the allegorical level it may refer to Christ, who appears at "just the right time," but on the human level it seems to be about the strangeness of love, which has a mind of its own, and a warning about the sin of presumption.

The Bible has the highest possible view of love and marriage.

When Christ was asked about the legality of divorce, he said this: “But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”

One flesh! This is an ideal and mystery not dreamed of by any love poet or philosopher. Part of the soulfulness of the Song of Songs comes from the sanctification of love and marriage. The soul obtains being in a body in this uncertain realm and in some sense is at war with the body; but romantic love, which includes the body, can ennoble the soul. Romantic love involves an attempt to get back to Eden and paradise by making two into one.

But the Song of Songs is soulful in another way as well, since many commenters see it as an allegory of Christ and his bride, the church. The Daughters of Jerusalem ask the bride: “What is your beloved more than another beloved, O most beautiful among women?” She tells them he is incomparable. Beyond love poetry boilerplate, this can refer to the incomparable merits of Christ and his great sacrifice for his metaphorical bride. She says this about him: “His mouth is most sweet, and he is altogether desirable. This is my beloved and this is my friend.”

Nothing is sweeter than the words of Christ, and he refers to himself as our friend. He is not just our Savior; he is our lover as well, laying down his life for us. Just as romantic love is rooted ultimately in the desire for life, not just procreation but the spiritual creativity of two becoming one flesh, and a new identity discovered therein, so the love of Christ brings life to his bride, the church, as well as an identity hidden in the creativity of God. The following passage often appears in church liturgy:

My beloved speaks and says to me:  
 “Arise, my love, my beautiful one,  
 and come away,  
 for behold, the winter is past;  
 the rain is over and gone.  
 The flowers appear on the earth,  
 the time of singing has come,  
 and the voice of the turtledove  
 is heard in our land.  
 The fig tree ripens its figs,  
 and the vines are in blossom;  
 they give forth fragrance.

This is a description of the renewal of life. Yes, in context it references spring, the season of lovers, but it can also be taken to point to the good work that Christ would do for us on the cross when he laid down his own life so that we could have life. Spring is dear to the heart of all love poets (with the possible exception of Eliot), but spring is also the season of Easter and Resurrection.

The possibility that Christ is the beloved is hinted at in Psalm 45: “You are the most handsome of the sons of men; grace is poured upon your lips; therefore God has blessed you forever. Gird your sword on your thigh, O mighty one, in your splendor and majesty! In your majesty ride out victoriously for the cause of truth and meekness and righteousness; let your right hand teach you awesome deeds!” This may refer to one of Israel’s kings, but it also sounds very much like Christ. After all, only he was “blessed forever.”

Here is where the bride (the church) comes in: “Hear, O daughter, and consider, and incline your ear: forget your people and your father’s house, and the king will desire your beauty. Since he is your lord, bow to him. The people of Tyre will seek your favor with gifts, the richest of the people. All glorious is the princess in her chamber, with robes interwoven with gold. In many-colored robes she is led to the king, with her virgin companions following behind her. With joy and gladness they are led along as they enter the palace of the king.”

This psalm contains a reference to another great and soulful story in the Bible—about Ruth and the history-altering choice she made. Naomi and her husband had emigrated to Moab during a famine. Naomi’s husband died, and her two sons married Moabite women, one of whom was Ruth. The sons die as well, and their Moabite wives, having no other means of support, come into Naomi’s house. Knowing she cannot afford to support them, she encourages them to return to their households and their gods:

“And she [Naomi] said, ‘See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.’ But Ruth said, ‘Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.’”

In this very soulful story, Ruth chose the God of Abraham and Isaac willingly, even if it meant poverty and abandonment. She was,

as the psalmist puts it, the daughter who has “forgotten her people and her father’s house.” She has chosen the God of life over false gods of fertility and destruction. This is what makes her story soulful, in addition to her tender attachment to her mother-in-law.

Psalms 45 is soulful because it invokes romantic love between the king and the “daughter” who has chosen Jehovah; but it also goes far beyond romantic love by intimating the relationship between Christ and his church, which comes to him not in robes made by human hands but in new robes. These new garments are gold and infinitely precious because he has purified them through his sacrifice on the cross.

This marriage of Redeemer and redeemed is described in an astonishing prophecy from Isaiah:

You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord,  
and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.  
You shall no more be termed Forsaken,  
and your land shall no more be termed Desolate,  
but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her,  
and your land Married;  
for the Lord delights in you,  
and your land shall be married.  
For as a young man marries a young woman,  
so shall your sons marry you,  
and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,  
so shall your God rejoice over you.

God’s love for Israel is so great that it is like wedded bliss! The Lord rejoices over the bride. It is Christ who is going to make this blissful marriage possible by washing away her sins. It is Christ who is going to make her worthy of such bliss by giving his life on the cross, by laying down his life for the bride.

Christ is often referred to as the bridegroom in the New Testament, first, and perhaps most soulfully, by John the Baptist: “The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease.” Christ also describes himself as the bridegroom in the parable of the ten virgins.

We have the following clarifying comment from Paul: “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the

church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.” Christ gave his life for the bride because he wanted to love her more.

The bride image becomes apocalyptic in Revelation: “Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, ‘Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure—for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.’”

This passage from the final book of the Bible indicates that the Song of Songs, deeply soulful in its own right, points to the most soulful thing of all, which is the notion of Christ as a lover who sacrifices all for the sake of his beloved bride, the church.

## The Psalms

**T**HE PSALMS ARE FULL of an almost overwhelming soulfulness. We tend, perhaps, to lose sight of this, rather like having to remind ourselves of just how remarkable water is, or a loaf of fresh-baked bread, or the delights of nature, because they are so familiar.

Soulfulness is linked to life, and therefore it seems fitting that the very first psalm is all about life and how to obtain it. “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.” Note that the law is his *delight*. This is because “the law is spiritual”—it gives life.

“He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither.” These metaphorical rivers remind us of the thirst that cannot be satisfied by the world, the thirst for life, and also of the rock in the desert that foreshadows Christ. Water is the source of life, which may be why we are drawn to rivers, brooks, lakes, the sea. The language is plain but poetic because it invokes life, which is a transcendent value.

“Its leaf does not wither.” The one who takes delight in the law will be evergreen. “In all that he does, he prospers.” There is a way to live that brings happiness and prosperity, as we saw in Proverbs. This way of living is rooted in the value of life; in the love of God, who is the giver of life; and in respect for the lives of others.

While Psalm 1 is purely sweet, the bittersweet quality of great soulfulness can be found in a psalm that has almost the opposite theme: “For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For they have no pangs until death; their bodies are fat and sleek. They are not in trouble as others are; they are not stricken like the rest of mankind. Therefore pride is their necklace; violence covers them as a garment.” Here it is not the righteous who prosper but the wicked.

If the first psalm is a wisdom psalm in the sunny tradition of Proverbs, then this is a wisdom psalm in the somewhat darker tradition of Job. The psalmist is suffering because he sees the

prosperity of the unrighteous. “All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning.” Like Job, he wants to know why good things happen to bad people. He experiences the arrogant prosperity of those who do not love God and abuse their neighbors as a bitter nothingness.

Then he remembers where to look for wisdom: “But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end. Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin.” The sanctuary of God is both a holy place and a sanctuary from the world. In the safety of sanctuary the psalmist is able to see things more clearly. He sees the soulfulness of God and the slippery slope he creates for those who do not show respect for life.

One reason why psalms like this are so soulful is that they are personal. There is nothing like the following intimate confession in any other ancient literature: “When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you.” Sometimes the long walk of life takes us into the world and discouragement, and sometimes it takes us into the sanctuary. “Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but you?”

The psalmist raises a very good question. Where can we find the soulfulness that satisfies our thirst? If we seek it in the world, then we are likely to be disappointed; but if it can be found in the sanctuary, in church, then we must not forget to pay a visit. We must not become so discouraged that we forget the very idea of sanctuary. God prepares a sweet place of repose for those who honor him, a place for the restoration of life.

This sanctuary, this sweet repose for lovers of soulfulness, is not just found in buildings made of stone. It is found in abundance in the psalms themselves. Consider the following verse: “Steadfast love and faithfulness meet; righteousness and peace kiss each other.” Now love and truth cannot meet together by mortal means if love is love and truth is truth. Other gods could not make them meet. In the *Iliad*, Zeus wanted to be merciful to Hector, but truth was on the side of the Greeks. Hector must be humiliated in the end because the unbending rule cannot be broken.

Love and truth can meet in one way only—if God is love. In that



case God is true to himself when he is love. They are met together when God sent his son to die in our place, to pay the price for our sins. On the cross, love is truth and truth is love. Moreover, the cross is both perfectly righteous and also makes peace between us and God. “Righteousness and peace kiss each other.”

The Bible is the book of merciful love. David was very much in need of mercy after he sinned with Bathsheba and had her husband killed to cover up the resulting pregnancy. “My sin is ever before me”—these words are not just poetic rhetoric. They describe the wages of sin in those who have respect for the value of life. David started out as a righteous tree planted by streams of water; this was his identity. But he became the very thing he used to hate.

His dancing days were over, his tendency to rejoice in his own righteousness and faithfulness to God, but his triumphalism was replaced by something far more important and deep; for in his broken state, crushed under his own sin and limitations, David had an epiphany about the human predicament and the true source of restoration: “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

David has discovered the one thing we know for certain that God will not despise. That is important information. His words are soulful because they show a bitter knowledge of our unworthiness coupled with an appreciation of the sweetness of God’s mercy. No matter where we may be in our lives, our brief and stormy sojourn on this planet, we know there is a way to return to God, through a broken and contrite heart, and a stone for a pillow.

A broken spirit is a wormhole to God. People try to get to him through various and sundry means, but there is only one route that is foolproof. Hence David’s great insight brings us back to the whole narrative of the Bible and the fall of man. If pride was the cause of our calamity, then humility—the soulful kind seen in David, rooted in a deep sense of his own unworthiness and a deep love of God—is the only reliable route of return.

His insight also casts light on the nature of soulfulness. The youthful David dancing in front of the Ark is a triumphant figure but not very soulful. He is too full of himself, too boastful. But he becomes the epitome of soulfulness when he confesses his broken spirit and puts his trust in God instead of his own righteousness. At that point his words obtain the bittersweet quality that makes soulfulness such a distinctive pleasure.

“Cast me not away from your presence; and take not your Holy Spirit from me.” Such tender words! David loves God and is afraid of a great divorce on account of his sins. “Restore to me the joy of your salvation; and uphold me with a willing spirit.” We have heard talk of remarkable fellows who can break the law, even murder, and feel no remorse. To us they are to be pitied above all men. No one who harms his neighbor and feels no remorse can be soulful.

“Create in me a clean heart, O God.” Yes, do! How we long for it on long summer days and winter nights. This sentiment brings to mind another psalm—“Sing to the Lord a new song.” In the Bible, true hope is not simply a matter of papering over the past. It is about “making all things new.” It is about fresh starts, second chances, new beginnings, even if we happen to be in need of them every day, including today and tomorrow.

The “new song” is something thrilling, something that has not been worn out by weariness with the world or our own selves. It looks forward to the cross, which creates a clean heart in us and makes our thought-life new. We have been living in the new age for two thousand years now without realizing it—the age of grace. We have an entirely new way of thinking about ourselves and our identity because of the cross.

We need to have things made new periodically because we are prone to despair. This is the theme of one of the most popular psalms down through the ages—“Out of the depths I cry unto you, O Lord!” We may go into the depths in those unguarded moments when there are no filters on and no outside distractions; when we truly know ourselves and our depravity. “If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?”

But there can be a blessing hidden in despair; first, in the sense of knowing ourselves and the reality of the human condition, and also because the darkest hour always comes before the dawn. The psalmist ends his mournful song this way: “My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning.”

Watchmen wait for the morning because they long to get past the terrors of the night. Despair is the dark night of the soul and nothingness—but only those who know their nothingness can truly experience the hope of restoration. We wait for God because we have faith that the light will return in the morning. No matter how dark it seems, there will always be light.

The watchman's despair is an important theme of the Bible. Elijah had a great triumph, calling down fire on the altar, killing the prophets of Baal—until Jezebel heard about it and threatened his life. “But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he asked that he might die, saying, ‘It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers.’”

He had seen his mortality; he was in despair. But it was just at this low point that Elijah had a true mountaintop experience. No, he did not find God in the earthquake or the fire, but he heard a “still, small voice.” This is the voice that comes to us when we are at our wit's end. It lifts us up for the very reason that it is still and small. In other words, it is personal. God is speaking directly to us. Light and identity are restored.

In the same way, the psalmist says: “I wait for the Lord, my soul doth wait, and in his word I hope.” The poor fellow may be filled with anxiety and despair, but he knows that God is love. Therefore he does not allow the noise in his head to undo him. “O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is plenteous redemption. And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.”

Here in a nutshell is the soulfulness of the Bible. We are mortal and fall short of our own expectations. We see the spirituality of the law—we love the law in our innermost being, as Paul says, because we know that the law is rooted in love—but it seems we are unable to obey it perfectly. The righteous man planted by streams of water was just a beautiful dream. And yet “with the Lord there is steadfast love.” The overpowering experience of soulfulness is found in the transition between these two ideas.

Like Isaiah, the psalmists often talk directly to the soul: “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?” This question is soulful first because it *acknowledges* the soul and its sorrows. “Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have broken rejoice.” Has God really broken our bones? No, it is our own conscience. The soul is cast down because it desires life and is conscious of its own mortal failings.

But those who remember to put their trust in God's mercy are released from their darkness and find themselves in a happier place: “When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue

with shouts of joy.” There is a certain delirium in mercy. The farther we go into the depths of captivity and sorrow, the more this delirium becomes possible—because it is only in the depths that we see ourselves as we really are.

From the emotional extremes of despair and delirium, the psalmist turns to a sober reflection on what can truly satisfy the soul. “How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!” The dwelling place of God is lovely because it is the place of life. “My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God.” It is hard to get to this point, being attached to the world and its ways, but surely joy and peace await those who do.

Of course many will feel that David’s most soulful psalm is the shepherd psalm. It has already been discussed, but it fits in here as the perfect expression of the soul’s contentment in God. “He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul.” First, this is about the restoration of the soul, which is very much to our theme. The words remind us of the beauty of creation and how it fills the soul. But it is interesting to note that *he* is the one leading us to the still waters. He *makes* us lie down in green pastures.

Nature is always there in all her glory, ready to feed the soul, but who will lead us to her consolations when we are lost and need to be filled? God is our shepherd; it is his Spirit that engages us and his ever-directing rod and staff that comfort us. He leads me beside the still waters—and *then* my soul is restored. Otherwise it is too easy to be waylaid by the world.

“He leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.” Humility and a sense of proportion are the source of the soulfulness in this sentiment. “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.” We are mortal, and the shadow of death looms over us once we become conscious of our mortality—but he brings life.

The value of life is the basis of a beautiful psalm that describes the majesty of God. It begins the way any ancient poet might begin when trying to intimate divine majesty, or the difference between God and men: “God has taken his place in the divine council.” We often hear the term “majesty of God” in our churches, but the psalmist has something very specific in mind. God’s majesty is linked to the value of life.

When the father god takes his place in the divine councils of the

poets, it is always for the purpose of machination. Those gods are like human beings with all of their wrangling and selfishness. The psalmist has a very different scene in mind, however. The divine council is devoted to justice. “How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked?” “Give justice to the weak and fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute.”

Almighty God ascends his throne of power to take the part of the downtrodden. Is there a comparable passage in Homer, Virgil, Sophocles, Aeschylus? They conceived of society in classes; the unfortunates mentioned here would have been beneath their notice. “Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.” The God of Abraham and Isaac is a soulful God because he gives life not just to the rich and powerful but to all who trust and believe.

For that matter, has justice ever been celebrated with such joy as in the Psalms?

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth;  
 break forth into joyous song and sing praises!  
 Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre,  
 with the lyre and the sound of melody!  
 With trumpets and the sound of the horn  
 make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord!  
 Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;  
 the world and those who dwell in it!  
 Let the rivers clap their hands;  
 let the hills sing for joy together  
 before the Lord, for he comes  
 to judge the earth.  
 He will judge the world with righteousness,  
 and the peoples with equity.

David had a heart for justice. “I will sing of loyalty and of justice; to thee, O LORD, I will sing.” He leaves no doubt as to where his loyalties lie: “I will not set before my eyes anything that is worthless. I hate the work of those who fall away; it shall not cling to me. A perverse heart shall be far from me; I will know nothing of evil.” In the Bible, justice means such things as fair treatment in the courts regardless of social status, standing up for the powerless, and economic justice. This is the most soulful concept of justice that can be imagined.

It is soulful because it is rooted in love. The soulful notion that “God is love,” while not directly expressed in the Old Testament, is nonetheless strongly implied. This can be seen in the great psalm

that carries the following burden: “For his steadfast love endures forever.” This psalm presents a short history of Israel. Everything God has done for her shows that he is love. His love for Israel has endured down through the ages, and therefore, by prophetic inspiration, will endure forever.

The perfect love attributed to God is the source of much of the soulfulness of the Psalms. A favorite of all believers is the “psalm of ascent” that begins thusly: “I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.” We like to think the series of “psalms of ascent” begins here because the psalmist lifts up his eyes to divine love; although more ingenious explanations have been offered.

The psalm indicates the intimate love of God: “The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade on your right hand. The sun will not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.” The promise is not just a general one to Israel but to each individual believer. “The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore.” The Lord is our shepherd and our keeper. This soulful concept of God cannot be found in any other book.

The Psalms are a virtual treasure-trove of soulfulness. We have barely scratched the surface. But before we move on, allow us to tell an amusing story about ourselves. There are not a few psalms that have always struck us as being a little disconcerting. We will call them the retribution psalms. They are about our enemies and the natural desire to see to them put in their place. To us they seemed to conflict with the following important admonition: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

Something has changed our view dramatically, however. Our dear wife, perhaps in an attempt to keep us on the straight and narrow, now begins each day by reading aloud from the Bible. She happened to read some of these psalms during Lent. Hearing them read out loud during that solemn season was a revelation. Only then did we realize that they are not really about David. They are prophetic. They are about Christ.

Psalms 2 and 22 are among the most famous examples of the foreshadowing we have in mind, but we found the following image to be particularly striking: “For without cause they hid their net for me; without cause they dug a pit for my life. Let destruction come upon him when he does not know it! And let the net that he hid

ensnare him; let him fall into it—to his destruction! Then my soul will rejoice in the Lord, exulting in his salvation.”

If this were just about David, then we would struggle to find anything very soulful in it. But everything changes if we think of the speaker as Christ in Jerusalem during Holy Week. Truly it is without cause that they have laid their nets of treachery for him. They bring their destruction on themselves; he does not bring it. Indeed, he forgives them from the cross.

The retribution psalms become very soulful if we hear them as Christ speaking. We realize this is not new wisdom; in fact it is very old. But it is new to *us*. It seems there is something special about hearing the word read out loud and not simply reading it ourselves. We think of the exiles returning to the promised land and how they were overcome when they heard the long-lost word read aloud.

The same thing happened when we heard Psalm 45. The image of Mary clothed in majesty struck us far more forcefully when we heard it read than when we had read it ourselves many times in the past. That is, it struck us as an actual image. We could see her. The spoken word brought out the vastness of the image, the sense of it coming from far-off places and filling space.

Who is this “Queen in gold of Ophir”? Is it the same humble girl from an obscure town who said, “Let it be to me according to your word”? In the Bible and no other ancient text, to be queenly is to be dressed in humility, gentleness, meekness, obedience, and kindness. That is the soulful image we have of Mary.

Which gives us a convenient segue into our discussion of her own very memorable song...

## Magnificat

**T**HIS SEEMS AS SENSIBLE a place as any to move our discussion from the Old Testament to the New, since in our view there is nothing more soulful than the deceptively simple song Mary sang when she went to see her cousin—nothing in all literature—and since it captures the spirit of the Old in the New, including many of the major themes we’ve been discussing.

Mary’s song is uniquely soulful because she knew her nothingness. We don’t talk about nothingness in our churches. We talk about sin and separation from God, but nothingness itself goes unmentioned and unnoticed. That is a pity, because nothingness is deep wisdom. “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” It is also the bitterness that makes Mary’s song so incomparably soulful.

Now there is a false nothingness of more recent vintage in which there is no soulfulness at all. It is seen in our supermen, followers of Nietzsche and Nihilism, who use it in a somewhat clever attempt to negate God and the good. They claim to embrace nothingness in defiance of any notion of “being”; but of course they do not claim to be nothing themselves. Quite the contrary—they call themselves supermen.

Just the opposite is seen in Mary. “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.” Mary is conscious of her low estate. She does not pretend to be something more than what she is—a young girl from a small village on the outskirts of a vast empire that is completely oblivious to her existence. This is what we mean when we say she knows her nothingness.

Feelings of nothingness are bitter when the thing we want most is a desirable identity. It is hard for mortals to come to terms with the reality that “all flesh is grass.” We surround ourselves with family or friends and become overly enamored of careers or possessions because we are trying to cover up our nothingness. And yet nothingness is our actual state of being apart from God. In the vast scheme of things, we are practically nothing. The only real difference between Mary and Caesar is she knows her low estate.

Nothingness is what confronted Abraham as he stood over Isaac



at the altar. Nothingness is what Jacob discovered when he was trapped in the desert between his uncle and his brother. Nothingness was the terror Elijah experienced when Jezebel wanted his life. Nothingness was what Solomon stumbled upon when he wandered from the way. *Lamentations* is a book of pure circumstantial nothingness. “He has driven and brought me into darkness without any light.”

Indeed, nothingness was the state of being in which Israel found itself at the time of Mary’s song, having been conquered by successive empires, and finally by Rome, the mightiest of them all. There was a Roman garrison in Jerusalem and Roman soldiers riding through the streets and the countryside in their brute finery, executing the will of a distant emperor. Nothing could make them feel their nothingness more acutely, the nation that viewed itself as the chosen people of God with an outsized destiny.

Nothingness deepens the soulfulness of Mary’s song. She is nothing in the eyes of the world, and yet God has deigned to lift her up and make her the mother of the Messiah. “He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.” Augustus was declared a god, but where is Augustus now? “He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate.” Imperial Rome lies in ruins, while Mary’s song lives forever in the hearts of those who love the sweetness of God.

## The Messiah and his mission

**T**HE LIFE OF CHRIST is the most soulful story ever told, for many reasons. One is his life-affirming commitment to healing the sick and bringing good news to the poor. Another is the baleful tale of how his mission of love put him at odds with the powers and dominions of this world and led to his demise. The most important reason, though, is that he laid down his life for his friends.

The soulfulness of the Bible is seen in its very conception of the Messiah. What would a savior look like to the world? For reasons already explained, the first thing we tend to think of is a conqueror, someone who restores our right and identity through might. The Jews themselves, not fully aware of the import of their own scriptures, thought of the Messiah in this way. He was going to come and vindicate them by putting the Romans in their place.

Christ was not this sort of redeemer, however. When John sent his disciples to inquire whether he was the one they were waiting for or if they should look for another, he gave them this reply: “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.” He is soulful because he comes to give life.

He did not come as a conqueror but as a tender babe. Not enough attention has been paid to the contrast between the manger and Rome. We hear Caesar Augustus invoked in the Christmas story but are too removed from the time and place to feel the magnitude of the disparity. Rome was the greatest empire the world had ever known, and Augustus was her greatest emperor. He boasted of having found Rome in brick and left her in marble. Rome was beautiful on the outside but hard and cruel within.

By contrast the manger had no visible glory of any kind. Far from being a marble palace, it was a stable, most likely in a rude cave or hostel. Augustus lived in luxury, with scores of servants, but the

Christ child was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger, a feeding trough for the animals. The resistance of the humble manger to the palaces of Rome is absolutely pure: empire versus tenderhearted love. This was a savior who comes in humility and meekness. Only such a savior is worthy to give life.

As the prophecy states, Christ did not come to conquer the world but to preach the good news to the poor and to heal the sick. Speaking of those miraculous healings, some people talk about them as if they were intended to be signs of power; and it is true that they helped his followers to believe. But first and foremost they were signs of God's love. The miracles were soulful because they brought healing and restored life.

Who would have dreamed of a Messiah who gives life instead of taking it? A savior who shows his power in compassionate miracles of healing and in the end lays down his life for his friends? And yet this is precisely the counterintuitive Messiah prophesied by Isaiah and embodied in Christ. His story is soulful because he shows the greatest love of all and because he comes "that they may have life and have it abundantly."

## Water for thirsty souls

ONE OF THE MOST soulful themes in the Bible is of water and refreshment for the soul. We have already quoted the great summons from Isaiah: “Come, everyone who thirsts; come to the waters.” The Psalms contain some very interesting water imagery: “As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?” As the body thirsts for water, which it needs to survive, so the soul pants for God. Why? Because only God can give life. The soul thirsts for the “living God,” for the Spirit, the Lord and giver of life. The essence of the soul is life, and life is its greatest desire.

Perhaps the most intriguing water image from the Psalms is this: “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.” This could be the river of blessing that comes from God to those who believe, but in our view it points to the Spirit of God. Christ said this: “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’ Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.” The rock in the desert has been discussed, the foreshadowing of Christ on the cross and the “water” that flowed from his side.

This water satisfies our thirst for life. From Ezekiel: “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.” This passage refers to the return of the Jews from captivity, but it can also describe the return of all who believe in Christ from the captivity of the grave.

And there is this dramatic image from Ezekiel: “Then he brought

me back to the door of the temple, and behold, water was issuing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east). The water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple, south of the altar.” Ezekiel’s guide shows him how this mysterious river grows and grows, causing life to spring forth in everything it touches.

Perhaps this burgeoning river of life is the small stream that started from Christ’s side and grows into salvation for everyone who believes. Christ compared himself to the temple: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” One of the chief purposes of the temple was to provide purification from sin. The temple was indeed destroyed by the Romans forty years later, but Christ, who was crucified but raised from the dead in three days, is a living stream of refreshment for the soul, and only he can provide purification.

Christ ties water and the restoration of life together in the scene with the woman at the well: “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” The spring of water welling up is an echo of Ezekiel’s small stream that turns into a flood of Spirit and life.

Finally there is this shimmering summation from Revelation: “Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.”

The Spirit flows through the river to the tree of life that we first encountered in the Garden of Eden. Paradise is restored through the blood of Christ. The Bible’s water imagery reflects the thirst of the soul for life and the power of the Spirit of God to satisfy this desire. This is why it is so soulful.

## His teachings

**R**EFRESHMENT FOR THE SOUL can be found in abundance in Christ's teachings. They are soulful for many reasons, but first of all because they build up the poor, which was a major part of his mission: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor."

What is this good news? "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The poor may be in a better position to inherit the kingdom of God than the rich because there is nothing standing between them and that kingdom. The rich may have beautiful homes and beautiful things, but this does not mean they have *life*. They have the illusion of life. Their possessions give them a certain standing in the world that can be confused with life itself; but then the very things that make them feel powerful may also wind up standing between them and the kingdom of God.

This was the dilemma of the rich young ruler who came to Christ asking what he had to do to inherit the kingdom of life. He was told to sell all he had and give the proceeds to the poor. He "went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions." He loved God, but he also loved his possessions. The story makes it plain that those possessions stood between him and the kingdom of life for which he had expressed a desire.

The poor man, on the other hand, has nothing to cling to; and therefore he is free to cling to God. Because he is poor, he finds himself in a position where he must depend upon God and his love. To trust in God as a loving Father is to know his reality and power, which is a great blessing. It is to have a kind of contentment the rich cannot have by clinging to their possessions. The poor man is rich in the kingdom of God, in faith and trust, while the rich man may not even know his poverty, if he is trusting in things that cannot give him life or enlightenment.

Christ fed the poor with such teachings, just as his mother prophesied. He could be quite provocative. After speaking with the

rich young ruler, he declared it is “easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.” Sayings like this give delight and comfort to the poor. They remind them that being rich is not necessarily all it appears to be. They give them dignity.

The consolation of the poor comes not only in the form of promises of spiritual blessing but also in a promise of vindication. The Bible is quite emphatic about this. “Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low.” “He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate.” “The last will be first, and the first last.” “He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.” The poor can take comfort in the assurance that they have life if they have Christ, while those who oppress or ignore them are on a primrose path to destruction.

This encouraging message is often delivered indirectly. Consider the following: “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” This teaching sounds like it is directed towards those who have the means to lay up treasures, but it is also a message of encouragement to those who do *not* have the means. It tells them that riches may not be what they appear to be. They cannot make us happy.

Another example is the bracing parable of the rich man whose land “produced plentifully.” He had so much grain that he pulled down his barns and built new ones to store up against the future. “But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’” This message was not just for the rich. It was also encoded for the poor, to change their thinking about the advantages of being rich and thus to give them comfort.

Christ also encouraged the poor—and all of us—by teaching about the *providence* of God, which is one of the most soulful themes in the Bible: “You open your hand; you satisfy the desire of every living thing.” God is pictured as a benevolent Father who knows the needs of his creatures and meets them gladly. This changes not just our concept of God but of all being. Without God, we have every reason to be anxious. We are Malthus. The sky is always falling

because we cannot imagine how the world's masses can be fed.

But Christ teaches just the opposite. From the worldview of the Bible, God is the creator, and he is provident by nature. His rule is one of abundance, not scarcity. Anxiety goes away when we cease to be afraid of every possible disaster and begin to trust in God and his benevolence. This view of God is food for the soul. What, after all, is the true cause of our anxiety? How is it that we can live in a land full of supermarkets where there is more food than we could possibly want and still be anxious?

We are anxious about food, clothing and shelter not just for their own sake but also for the sake of identity. This was the anxiety that caused Solomon to be such an overachiever and to conclude in the end that "all is vanity." The rich man in the parable has more than he needs—and *still* he wants to build more barns! It is not his body that needs more grain; his soul thirsts for something that grain and barns cannot give him.

That something is life. Christ ties all this together very neatly: "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" It is life that the soul is truly anxious about, which anxiety is transferred to food and clothing. And in the Bible, it is life that is the most valuable thing of all.

The message is twofold. First, God is a loving Father who knows our bodily needs and is provident. There is no need to worry. Second, we should not confuse the needs of the body with those of the soul. All anxiety comes from the thirst of the soul for life: "And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?" Which indeed? This saying draws a sharp contrast between the body, which can be satisfied with material things, and the soul, which can be satisfied with one thing only.

"And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these." What is the point of fashion? To obtain identity by conveying a certain image. The poor cannot play this image game. No, they are the foils to our finery. Christ's soulfully subversive message is that finery is nothing. What God has made in nature is inestimably more



soulful than any garment made by man, which cannot feed the soul. Why then be anxious about our raiment?

Like Isaiah and the Psalmists, Christ spoke directly to the needs of the soul: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” Why is the soul restless? Because it seeks a desirable identity and cannot find this identity in the world.

Such an identity can be found in Christ, however. The primary qualities of this identity are gentleness and meekness, which are soulful because they reflect the value of life. “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” This meekness is not weakness. It is meekness by intent, the outward form of a determined resistance to our own natural selfishness. To be meek like Jesus is to deny ourselves and take up our cross for the sake of others.

Another very soulful aspect of Christ’s teaching is his radical gospel of love. There is nothing like the following in Classical literature: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.” This is what he himself did. He did not strike back at the religious leaders who persecuted him or the Romans who crucified him.

The teaching is unique to Christ. And no wonder. It is hard to hear and especially hard to put into practice. Human conflict comes from the first sin and the spirit of emulation. We turn others into enemies because we imagine there is something to be gained from contending with them. These feelings are as old as Cain and Abel and lead to destruction.

Christ teaches an entirely different way, the way of life. From his perspective, our identity is preserved in God and his love. There is nothing our perceived enemy can do that can detract from our identity if God is our validation. Hence it is wise to love our enemies, as strange and radical as this teaching may seem.

Finally, Christ’s teaching is soulful because it is counterintuitive. It is deeply opposed to the vanity of the world. This can be seen in the beloved Beatitudes. “Blessed are the poor.” “Blessed are the meek.” “Blessed are those who mourn.” These blessings fly in the face of conventional wisdom. They are soulful because they are rooted in the value of life and not in pride or money, which are the

basis of the world.

They are soulful because they are radical and subversive. They exhibit a higher degree of resistance than is seen in any philosopher or poet. They are soulful because they contain deep wisdom. The world cannot comprehend the kind of blessing they describe. The world is focused on glorifying this mortal life, but they reflect the value of eternal life. They are soulful because they console those who cannot be like the world, who cling to God and his love.

## The soulfulness of true religion

**I**F RELIGION IS not soulful, then it is not true religion. This may seem surprising, based on what is seen of religion in the world, but it is a key message of the Bible. For instance, the people of Israel complained that they had fasted and God had not heard them. They thought that by fasting they were engaging in true religion, but God was quick to point out their folly:

Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight  
and to hit with a wicked fist.  
Fasting like yours this day  
will not make your voice to be heard on high.  
Is such the fast that I choose,  
a day for a person to humble himself?  
Is it to bow down his head like a reed,  
and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him?  
Will you call this a fast,  
and a day acceptable to the Lord?  
Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of wickedness,  
to undo the straps of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?  
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover him,  
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?  
Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing shall spring up speedily;  
your righteousness shall go before you;  
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.

They were quarrelling because they were fasting to compare themselves with each other. They were using fasting as a sign of holiness when fasting is supposed to indicate repentance. Their religion was not true religion and it was not soulful. Instead it was puffed up with conceit. Religion is just as susceptible to vanity as any other human endeavor. Just because we place it in a solemn church with stained glass windows does not mean it is unstained by the first sin. God was not listening to them because they were using religion to glorify themselves.

According to Isaiah, it is not true religion that is seen in ostentatious fasting, as salutary as fasting might be to those who use

it with a right understanding—as did Christ and Moses. No, true religion is to be charitable and merciful and to act justly, particularly to those who are less advantaged than ourselves. This definition of religion is very soulful. It has nothing to do with any outward show. No, true religion is rooted in the value of life.

Christ said: “Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” This refers to their teachings and to their shows of holiness, which were puffed up with pride. “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.” The reward they were seeking was to be honored as religious men. His teaching recommends a stout resistance to this poisonous vanity.

In the parable of the good Samaritan, the priest and Levite—good religious men—will not stop to help someone who has been beaten and robbed and left to die by the side of the road. Perhaps they are trying to maintain a pristine outward appearance, which they mistake for holiness. But holiness has nothing at all to do with outward appearances. Not in the Bible, anyway. Holiness is that which builds up life. It was up to the Samaritan, not considered to be religious at all, to demonstrate true holiness by helping the poor man and making sure he was cared for.

The point of the parable is obvious: true religion is that which manifests God’s love by building up life. False religion is used to build up something else—typically an individual, but also an institution, an idea, a notion of value, an allegiance. The Good Samaritan is a deeply soulful character. Almost everyone has the sense to love and honor him. But it is the other two who are *seen* to be religious. This is why the world may have the notion that there is nothing soulful about religion.

Christ was the ultimate critic of making religion unsoulful by using it to glorify ourselves: “And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” Why

are they hypocritical? Because they want to be seen to be holy when “no one is good except God alone.” Why should we go in the closet when we pray? Because it is a good way to cheat our vanity.

Christ was in no mood to hide his disgust with religious hypocrisy by the time he reached Jerusalem. “They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others.” This is plain speaking. Then he offers the following harsh assessment: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”

The reason for the strong language is that religious hypocrisy is not just an offense to God and his love; it also drives away the sheep by giving religion a bad name. The Bible contains the most soulful description of religion in all literature: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” Religion is charity and self-control. This description shows humility, gentleness and kindness—soulful virtues all. But it was not what was seen in the religious leaders of Christ’s time.

The other reason for the strong language is that religious vanity oppresses others. The type of oppression we have in mind can be seen in the story about Christ attending a dinner party at the house of Simon the Pharisee. A certain woman had the temerity to make an appearance where she was not wanted. “And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment.”

Simon said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner.” That is the oppression. Simon has annihilated her in his mind. But Christ is having none of it: “Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, ‘Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair.

You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.”

Simon has a *concept* of holiness in his mind shaped by things that have nothing to do with holiness at all. The sinful woman does not happen to fit those notions, first because of who she was, but also because of her rather undignified behavior. And yet she was obedient to the first and greatest commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” By that measure, her behavior was holy.

True religion was seen in her love, but not in Simon and his judgments, as Christ makes perfectly clear. The soulfulness of the story about the sinful woman also comes from the beautiful idea of second chances. Yes, she was a sinner, just as Simon said, but she was not dead in her sin. There was still a possibility of life, of new beginnings, of a change in who she was and where she was headed; she grasped it when she saw the light in Christ and his kindness. She is an example of the power of restoration love.

Finally, true religion is *passionate*: “I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.” If we encounter a manifestation of religion in our local ecclesiastical institution that is dispassionate, that is lukewarm, then it is not true religion, according to the founder of the faith. And if it is not passionate, then it also cannot be soulful.

Passion can be misdirected. In the Corinthian church, it was used to glorify people who talked in tongues even if they were talking nonsense. The passion, the heat, that the Lamb has in mind involves a passionate love of the brethren even when that love brings us pain; a passion for the cross, the ultimate sign of restoration love; a passion for light over darkness; a passion for charity and the poor; a passion for mercy and justice; a passion for glorifying the graciousness of a loving God; a passion for the word and sacraments; a passion for redeeming those who are lost; a passion for the “weak ones” among us and their spiritual well-being; a passion for healing; a passion for worship and prayer.

## A tenderhearted love

ONE OF OUR FAVORITE stories about Christ was when he was attempting to get away from the crowds that constantly pressed upon him. But the people came running after him, and when he saw them, “he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.”

He had a tender heart. A kindly-affectioned love is the most elevating emotion known to humankind, and Christ was full of such a love. He demonstrated this on many occasions; for instance when he talked to the woman at the well; when he was visiting with Mary and Martha; when he went to Matthew’s house, even though it was a place where rabbis were not supposed to go; in his openness to the Centurion, a Roman but a friend to Israel; but most of all in his conversations with his disciples.

One of the most soulful scenes in all literature is the Last Supper. It is reminiscent of Socrates consoling his friends, but the tenderness of Christ’s sentiments and sweetness of his language are unique in world literature. As is the fact that he began by washing their feet. We have lost touch with this ancient ritual of hospitality because we do not walk around in sandals on hot, dusty roads; but it was a way for a host to show kindness to his guests, to refresh them by having his servants wash their feet. And it was a doubly tender gesture because Christ took on the role of servant himself.

He called the disciples his “little children.” He gave them a new commandment, the only one he gave during his ministry: “Love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.” The Last Supper is filled with tender words of love. “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me.” What were they to believe in? Not just a name, but the power of restoration love, which was about to be revealed on the cross.

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you.” He is about to give them his own body and blood. “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and

that your joy may be full.” His tender concern is for their joy, just as parents desire happiness for their children.

This great tenderness was shown most affectingly on the cross. As the end neared, in the midst of his pain and suffering, he remembered his mother. “Woman, behold, your son,” he said, commending her to the care of John. “And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.”



## Setting his face like a flint

**B**UT KINDLY-AFFECTIONED LOVE is not *all* we see in Christ, the most soulful savior. We also see a heroic love, especially when he went to the cross. Here is an interesting prophecy from Isaiah in which the Messiah speaks: “But the Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame. He who vindicates me is near.”

Isaiah was right. Christ set his face like a flint: “When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” He did not desire the cross. He was no more eager for it than any other normal person would be. He prayed for the cup to pass but forced himself to go because he put restoration love above all things, even his own life. This heroic, self-sacrificing love is what makes him so irresistibly soulful.

In the Bible, love is not just the warm feeling we have for our spouses or children or friends. We are also called upon to love our enemies. Love can be very hard. On the cross, it was the hardest thing of all. It can require us to set our face like a flint. “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.”

Christ laid aside his rights and privileges in order to save us. It was love that made him lay them down. He did not resist arrest when Judas and the temple guards came for him or the abuse that was heaped upon him. Just a week earlier he had been welcomed into Jerusalem like a king, but he made no attempt to rally his followers or turn the crowds against his tormentors. He remained silent before Pilate.

He endured all this because he had faith that “the Lord God helps me” and “he who vindicates me is near.” As the Psalmist put it, “For the king trusts in the LORD; and through the steadfast love of the Most High he shall not be moved.” Those who suffer for the sake of love will be vindicated, since “God is love.”

If they lay down their mortal lives for the sake of love, they will receive life itself. This is the uniquely soulful message of the Bible. “For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it again.” Christ laid down his life for his friends, but his reward was eternal life and a heavenly crown.

The Bible is soulful because it presents a choice between divine love, which builds up life, and vanity, which leads directly to the grave. Its entire value system is based on this choice, starting in the Garden of Eden. To cling to love brings suffering when it puts us at odds with the world. Christ loved perfectly, and his perfect love got him into trouble with the religious leaders, who saw him as a threat to their power and position.

He set his face like a flint in order to go to the cross, where he laid down his life for his friends—which refers to all who believe. This self-sacrificing love is the most soulful love in existence.

## Do not judge

**C**HRIST'S TEACHINGS INCLUDE the following soulful prohibition: "Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you." This teaching does not prohibit the use of judgment as a tool for administering justice or in a constructive way; what it prohibits is the use of judgment to tear down others.

According to the Bible, the first sin was based on a love of judgment. Adam and Eve ate from the tree of judgment—or of the "knowledge of good and evil," which is judgment—because they wanted to be like God. The meaning is this: we mortals are in love with the forbidden fruit of judgment. It is pleasing to the eyes and mind because it deceives us into thinking it can make us like God. Satan slithers still in our love of judgment.

It deceives us because of the bondage of the grave, which causes us to look at life as a zero-sum game. We desire an immortal identity unconsciously, and this desire causes us to long to prefer ourselves to others. The socially acceptable way to do this is through judgment. Whenever we tear someone else down through judgment, we are trying indirectly to elevate ourselves.

But judging others cannot make us like God—because we are mortal. It does not matter how proficient we may be at knocking others down to size and tilting the playing field in our direction; in the end, death is the great leveler of us all. The more we attempt to build ourselves up in life, the more our nothingness is exposed.

As soon as Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit their eyes were opened and they realized they were naked. They realized they were *not* "like God"; they were created beings, vulnerable. The fruit of judgment, which appears to be sweet, is in fact very bitter, since it exposes our nakedness, our true condition as mortal beings with feet of clay. This is the meaning of "the measure you use."

There are many examples of Christ practicing what he preached. His interaction with the sinful woman has already been discussed. Another iconic story is his encounter with the woman at the well.

He had every reason to judge her. The entire nation of Israel sat in judgment of her as an “unclean” woman. She was also an outcast from polite society, with her colorful marriage history. But he did not judge her. He offered her his “living water.”

Another example is the centurion who came to him on account of his paralyzed servant. The gentiles were considered unclean, and the centurion was a commander of the despised occupying force. But Christ said this about him: “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.” Then there was the widow and her mite. The rich were bringing their offerings to the treasury when the widow put in her two coins. “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.” This shows that it is important not to judge by appearances.

Egos are fragile and require delicate handling. Christ made this very clear with the following warning: “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.”

Hell fire for “you fool”? Sobering thought. How many of us do worse than this every day, at least in our minds? Here is a case where hell fire is brought to bear in defense of the most delicate thing of all: the human heart. Do we take his warning seriously? We should, because it is serious, and it produces soulful effects, such as gentleness and kindness.

The teaching “Do not judge” includes the warning “that you be not judged.” In the most obvious sense this indicates that on the last day we will meet a Judge who will hold us accountable for the judgments we ourselves have made. It probably also means that when we judge, judgment is returned upon us twofold by those whom we judge. They will not be happy if we judge them.

But does it mean something else as well? Judging others cannot give us the happiness we seek because it cannot give us life. Indeed, it exposes our limitations. Simon did not succeed in making himself any less mortal than the sinful woman by judging her. Christ read his thoughts and exposed his vanity and the nothingness of his judgments. Those who listen to their conscience—are they not exposed in the same way when they judge?

## THE MOST SOULFUL BOOK

Christ's prohibition against judgment is unique to the Bible, as is the deep wisdom behind it. It is soulful because it preserves life.

## A stout resistance

**W**E MENTIONED that the soulfulness of the Bible includes an element of resistance to that which is not soulful. This resistance was very evident in Christ. It was the thing that got him into trouble.

First, he resisted “the world.” About his disciples, he said: “I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.” He meant they were not worldly; they had their minds set on Spirit and not on the flesh. His resistance is seen in such sayings as “you cannot serve God and money” and “the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.”

He also resisted the shallowness of legalism and outward shows of religion. The putative religious leaders of his day understood the letter of the law but not the spirit of the law. “For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” The spirit of the law brings life because “the law is spiritual,” but the letter of the law brings death through judgment. “They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.”

The purpose of the sacrificial law was to relieve burdens, not to pile them on. Its kindly intention was to soothe the conscience of the sinner by providing a sense of forgiveness. Looked at this way, the sacrificial law is soulful because it builds up life. It becomes even more soulful when we think of it as “but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities,” as the writer of Hebrews describes it.

The religious leaders, however, were turning the ceremonial law into something very unsoulful. They used it to obtain power and to glorify themselves. This is why they were offended when Christ told the man with palsy that his sins were forgiven. They accused him of blasphemy, claiming that only God can forgive sins; but the real reason they were offended was that they held the keys to forgiveness through the ceremonial law.

It was not the love of God that caused them offense but self-love and spiritual pride. They were willing to let the cripple remain

unforgiven because he lacked the means to fulfill the law. Christ showed them what true religion was by forgiving the man and also healing him. True religion restores both body and mind to health. True religion is rooted in the value of life, not in rules or rituals that glorify men or their pomp or notions of value.

The religious leaders loved the *power* the law gave them. They rebuked Christ when his disciples plucked ears of corn. “And the Pharisees were saying to him, ‘Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?’ And he said to them, ‘Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?’ And he said to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.’”

This response demonstrates the difference between the spirit and the letter of the law. The Sabbath was made for mortals as a day of rest from their labors. Without it, they might never rest, so strong is the spirit of emulation within them. The Sabbath was established for our own good, to refresh us and turn our minds to spiritual things; but the Pharisees were focused on the letter of the law, which gave them a sense of power. They did not see the deep spiritual meaning of the commandment.

Christ resisted the vanity of outward manifestations of religion. This was seen in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector who go into the temple to pray. The Pharisee boasts thus: “God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.” He is using religion to glorify himself. He wants to seem holier than the tax collector and thus more valuable in the eyes of God.

The story has a surprise ending for those who are not aware of the great soulfulness of the Bible. “But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

It was the miserable sinner who beat his breast in repentance and sorrow who went home justified, not the Pharisee who was trying to

seem religious. Why? Because from the Biblical point of view the Pharisee is a sinner just like the tax collector. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” The attempt to use religion to glorify himself is based on moral vanity, not holiness.

The resistance on display in the parable is soulful because it is deep. True religion is rooted in the value of life, which cannot be seen in any outward show. Christ sees through the shallow religion of the religious leaders and exposes their vanity with penetrating soulfulness. His resistance was perilous. It was provocative parables like this one that got him into trouble with the religious leaders and led ultimately to his death.



## The most soulful sign

**T**HE CROSS IS the most soulful sign of all. Even people who are not Christians can be seen wearing crosses. On some level they realize there is something soulful about the cross, and they want some of that deep feeling for themselves.

For one thing, the cross is a sign of a tragic story of love misunderstood. A man is crucified, not for any wrongdoing but for being kind; not for breaking the law but for obeying it in ways that exposed the vanity of the religious leaders: for healing the sick, forgiving sins, restoring sight, preaching the good news to the poor. He was crucified for loving his neighbor. He set his face like a flint and did not take up the sword against his enemies.

But the main reason the cross is soulful is that he laid down his life for his friends. He took the punishment of the human race on himself and became the sacrifice through which we were reconciled to God. The cruelty of the cross, coupled with his great love, produces an abundance of soulfulness. People love to wear crosses because they understand this instinctively.

The cross is the most soulful sign because it shows that “God is love.” Modern philosophers ask the following question: what sign do we use to identify ourselves, and what does it really mean? In the Bible, God chooses a cross to reveal his identity. God so loved the world that he sent his only son to be crucified on a cross. This is the most soulful sign of God ever conceived.

## The Suffering Servant

**T**HE MOST SOULFUL hero also happens to be a Suffering Servant, the counterintuitive Messiah predicted by Isaiah: “He is despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.”

There is something inherently soulful about suffering. This is acknowledged in many religions and philosophies. In Classical literature the hero often suffers because of some “fatal flaw” through which he brings calamity on himself. His suffering is soulful to the extent that it is redemptive. That is, he is redeemed in our eyes if we can pity him for his suffering in spite of his flaw.

This was not the case with Christ, however. He did nothing wrong. He obeyed the commandments perfectly. Indeed, he obeyed them *too* perfectly, as far as the religious leaders were concerned. He was the Suffering Servant who was killed for doing right and showing love and kindness. His suffering came from staying humble in the face of opposition and persecution.

He was taken roughly in the garden by men with clubs. He was slapped, beaten and spat upon in the temple courtyard. Pontius Pilate had him whipped, perhaps in an attempt to draw sympathy from the crowd. The soldiers made a crown of thorns and pushed it down onto his head. He was forced to carry his cross to Golgotha, was nailed to it, and then hung up for all to see, the height of shame in the Roman Empire.

This was suffering on a spectacular scale. But we see another kind of suffering in the Suffering Servant as well, more subtle. The first time he is recorded speaking in his ministry was in his home town of Nazareth. He rebuked them for not receiving him as he had been received elsewhere—and they responded by trying to throw him off a cliff! His comment: “A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household.”

Then he began to run afoul of the Pharisees and other religious authorities. After some tense exchanges, we have this: “As he went

away from there, the scribes and the Pharisees began to press him hard and to provoke him to speak about many things, lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say.”

The religious leaders were constantly vying to trip him up, constantly asking him trick questions in an attempt to expose him. This was persecution by the very people who should have welcomed and honored him the most. Perhaps the most affecting example of this persecution was seen when he raised Lazarus from the dead. We will let the story speak for itself:

“So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, ‘What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.’ But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, ‘You know nothing at all. Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.’ He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. So from that day on they made plans to put him to death.”

Christ raised a man from the dead, not just dead but in the tomb for four days, the greatest miracle in recorded history, and a glorious sign of the power of restoration love; but instead of rejoicing at this sign of divine power, and worshipping him, the response of the religious leaders was to plot to put him to death. His good deeds were turned against him by those who were jealous of his popularity and power to do good.

Beyond all this, there is another kind of suffering that we would be remiss not to mention. Christ himself hinted at it when he was at a wedding feast: “Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he noticed how they chose the places of honor, saying to them, ‘When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him, and he who invited you both will come and say to you, ‘Give your place to this person,’ and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you. For everyone who exalts himself will

be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

We may suffer greatly when we humble ourselves and resist our fallen nature, as this parable recommends. The host is God, and the marriage feast is life in the current age, with the church as his bride. The key to happiness in this new age is to do the opposite of Adam and Eve, who tried to make themselves like God, and take the lowest seat first. Then God will see that we have a right understanding of our merits, as well as kindness and consideration for others, and will raise us up.

We *will* suffer if we take the lowest seat first and remain meek and lowly like Christ, but the goal of this suffering is life and a desirable identity: “Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

## Messengers of love

**T**HE NEW TESTAMENT LETTERS are full of a profound soulfulness. After Christ showed that God is love on the cross, the apostles—which simply means “the messengers I send”—felt moved to expand on this new revelation. They did so in a manner that has never been rivaled.

John sets the stage with the statement that “God is love.” This is the most soulful conception of God in all history. Nothing like it can be found in pagan religions or in the other world religions that we know today. Even the Jews did not have anything equivalent. They had a *sense* that God is love. They believed in a personal God who described himself as being “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and graciousness.” They knew that “the steadfast love of the Lord endures forever” and said so in the most emphatic way possible.

But it was not until they saw the horrible beauty of the cross that the veil was torn away and they understood the idea that “God is love”—that God is not just loving but love in his essence. What had been quite impossible to the human mind, limited by judgment and the fear of death, suddenly became self-evident when Christ laid down his life for his friends. It was this new revelation about the nature of God that caused them to become apostles of love.

John began his first letter with a strong dose of deep wisdom: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us.”

There is something inherently soulful in such vast cosmological statements, in their very scope, but this statement is especially soulful because it links “the light” to life. Christ is our light because of the life we saw in him; that is, in his resurrection. Ever since death came into the world, humanity had been stumbling around in the dark

looking for this light, and now we have seen it. The resurrection of Christ discloses the sacred value of life.

This valuation is no common thing. Try finding it in the philosophers or other religions. God breathed life directly into Adam, but the significance of the creation story was perhaps not fully revealed until John made the connection between life and “the light.” The life seen in Christ invests all of being with a numinous glow. It “makes all things new.”

New revelations about God and the light of life led to new ideas about the nature of being. “Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling.” If God is love, and life is our light, then to walk in the light of Christ is to build up life by loving one another. This concept of the good is beautiful and uniquely soulful.

We have talked about the soulfulness of wisdom. The highest form of wisdom is knowledge of God; and according to John, the way to obtain this wisdom is not through intellect, which was the method of the philosophers. It is to love as Christ loved. “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.”

It is too easy to rush over these deceptively simple words. They are actually quite profound. Intellect obtains knowledge through the dividing power of judgment, but no dividing power can provide knowledge of God. Indeed, the whole sad story of the human race began with Adam and Eve thinking too highly of judgment. They were deceived into believing it had the power to make them equal to God; instead it revealed their limitations.

But it seems there is an entirely different way to know God. It is possible to obtain the deep knowledge of God that intellect cannot provide through love—since God is love. By loving as Christ loved it is possible to obtain experience in one’s own life of how God works and of his character and power. This means of obtaining knowledge is supremely soulful because it builds up life and because it requires such things as humility, patience and meekness.

Love is also the way to obtain a new kind of happiness and blessing in the church. Christ said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my

disciples, if you have love for one another.” Based on this commandment, the apostles conceived of something entirely new in human history: a community built on sacrificial love.

The cornerstone of this new community was Christ; the building blocks were the lives of its members. “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.”

How is the construction of this glorious edifice to be accomplished? Not through the sword of intellect and judgment; not through doctrine, as important as that may be. No, the new temple is built by living a life of love: “Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”

One benefit of following Christ’s command to love one another was that the church became a light in the world, just as he predicted. We have the following report from the Roman historian Tertullian of what his friends were saying about the Christians: “Look how they love one another!” In a world torn apart by perpetual strife, perpetual unhappiness, the love seen in the early church, so vividly described in Acts 2, was a powerful witness to the light.

It was also a witness to a *new way of being*. The church, the community of love, provided an opportunity to undo the damage done in Eden. The early church referred to itself as “the Way.” There were many types of “ways” in the world, or prescriptions for a happy life. There were the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle and Epicurus and Epictetus. There was the Roman religion with its Pagan gods. But there was only one way that identified life as the “light of men,” and there was only one way that was based on the command to “love one another.”

“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in

love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

This passage is infused with a deep soulfulness that cannot be found in any other book. It is filled with the Spirit of life and with love. It contains a promise of the fullness of God. The community of love, obtained through faith in Christ and a willingness to follow him and lay down our own lives, was an entirely new way to obtain this most highly desired blessing.



## The soulfulness of Paul

**T**HIS MAY SEEM like a surprising topic to some, particularly if they are accustomed to looking at Paul through the prism of doctrine. It just so happens that the Reformation was started as a result of Luther studying Romans and rediscovering its riches for himself. Since then, Romans has been used as a pretext to fight doctrinal battles that divide the church; which seems highly ironic, since Paul wrote it to unite the church and bring it under the rule of love.

Paul had a soulful vision for the church. He wanted it to reflect the “unity of the Spirit.” Now the Spirit is described as the Lord and giver of life; therefore to reflect the unity of the Spirit is to reflect the value of life, the most soulful value known to humankind. But what does this mean in real practice? According to Paul, it means becoming like Christ and living a life of love and self-sacrifice. It means laying down all selfish desires for the sake of unity and perfect love in the church.

All of this is laid out very plainly in several of his letters: “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.”

Paul described the church very soulfully as Christ’s “body”—a living organic thing working together in perfect harmony. No one member is more valuable than any other in the body of Christ. Each member is vital, each has something important to contribute; therefore each is worthy of respect. The “still more excellent way” is to love one another in the same way that Christ loved. Then the body truly has Christ as its head.

From 1 Corinthians: “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one

body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit...But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”

In the body of Christ all members are important and are to be loved and cherished. This call to action leads to the most soulful description of love in all literature: “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

This is the very pinnacle of the exalted type of soulfulness we have in mind. A Christ-like love reverses the unhappiness that came into the world through pride. Eden was a paradise not just because it was beautiful but because there was perfect harmony between God and his creatures. This soulful conception of paradise as a community of perfect love is what lies behind Paul’s attempts to stamp out boasting, which spoils any chance of harmony and peace in the church. “Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened.” This echoes Christ’s warning about the “yeast of the Pharisees.”

Boasting is natural to humankind but fatal to the loving church that Paul envisioned. What kind of boasting goes on in a church? Often some form of religious pride. It seems, for example, that some in the Corinthian church were boasting about being more spiritual than their fellow Christians on the basis of speaking in tongues. Paul pointed out that the Spirit gave the gift of tongues on Pentecost for the edification of others; therefore it is not spiritual to speak in tongues in public places if no one can understand us.

One form of boasting he found especially troubling was the unwillingness of Jewish Christians to embrace the Gentiles that he was striving so valiantly to reach. They continued to cling to the ceremonial law and its separating power at a time when, in Paul's view, the ceremonial law had been superseded by Christ on the cross. For example, some of them were insisting the Gentiles had to be circumcised before they could be admitted to the fellowship.

By clinging to their tribal identity, they were in effect boasting. They were glorifying themselves and their identity at the expense of others. Paul's argument against boasting is two-pronged: "For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." First, no one has a right to boast because we are all sinners; and then no one has a right to boast because we are all equally saved by the kindness of Christ.

Since pride was the first sin, the way back to paradise is to stop boasting and love one another. This was why Paul was so strongly opposed to boasting and fervently in favor of egalitarianism in the church. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." This is an absolutely epochal statement. There is nothing even remotely like it in any other ancient book. "The parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable." Every member of the body of Christ is important. Every member is to be loved, honored and supported.

The rhetorical techniques that Paul uses to condemn boasting are often soulful in themselves, such as in Romans 7, where he makes himself the whipping boy of his own argument. He wanted to show that boasting is ruled out because no one can truly fulfill the law; but instead of merely stating this doctrine in a cold, dry manner, he brought it to life by confessing his own deficiencies. It seems he loves the law in his innermost being, but he is incapable of obeying it perfectly. Every time he tries he finds "another law" at work in him, the law of sin and death: "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing."

Paul deconstructs himself. The rhetorical strategy is really quite stunning for his time. In some ways it resembles the self-effacing humor seen in Socrates—but it is impossible to imagine Socrates allowing us to see his deficiencies, since the point of his philosophy was to equip the will to obtain happiness. Paul confesses his

weakness and foolishness in order to glorify God and his goodness, and also so that we might be encouraged to give up our love of boasting and discover the joy of life in the community of grace.

The passage is soulful in another way as well, since it epitomizes the confluence of bitterness and sweetness that distinguishes the Bible from all other books. Paul does not spare himself. He is completely open about his shortcomings and the bitter feelings they cause: “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” But then comes the sweetness: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.” And this: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

In a few short sentences, he has summed up the great soulfulness of the Bible. It is the only book that states the depravity of man in all of its bitterness, and it is also the only book that says “God is love” and has redeemed those who believe in him by the overflow of his graciousness, a thought which is impossibly sweet.

Paul was soulful in another way as well—as the provider of comfort. We talked about the great consolation passages found in the prophets and in the teachings of Christ, but nothing in all literature surpasses the following for sheer soulfulness: “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, ‘For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.’ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

This is soulful, first, because it magnifies the love of Christ, which is incomparable. But it is also soulful because it is supremely tender. It shows a passionate love for those who were in his care.

## Bear one another's burdens

**T**HE VISIONARY CHURCH that the apostles had in mind is described in a remarkable passage from Acts:

“And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”

This is a very soulful picture of the church as a place of love, generosity and sacrifice. There is nothing comparable in ancient literature. The modern notion of communism is infused with the same fervent idealism, but the difference is that the communal life of the church was based on a Christ-like love and not on hatred of the rich. Also it was entirely voluntary. No one compelled them.

But such a church is not obtained without sacrifice and some suffering. The New Testament letter writers were very clear about this. “So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”

These words equate Christ’s sacrifice with suffering for the sake of the church and for love. They are linked to Christ’s call to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him. The kind of church Paul has in mind is soulful because it is based on love and therefore requires sacrifice. He does not ask us to love those whom we love.

He implores us to love everyone within the body of Christ. This will cause some suffering as we mortify our selfish desires.

Here are some specifics: “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” And this: “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”

Peter also indicates that the church is built on sacrificial love: “Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for ‘All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.’ So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.”

And John also makes the connection between Christ’s sacrifice and the church: “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.” Love can require Christ-like suffering, but the reward is great: “God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.”

The type of sacrifice we have in mind can be summed up in the following from Paul: “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” Christ bore our burdens on the cross, and we must take up our own cross in order to bear the burdens of others. The admonition is soulful for the same reason that the cross is soulful. It

is rooted in love and in the value of life.

Paul described another kind of suffering that also seems very soulful to us: “We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known.” Today Paul is regarded as a towering historical figure, but at the time he was not “Saint Paul.” He was a homely little fellow (by his own description!) traveling around with a couple of helpers to spread the good news. He had been rejected at Jerusalem. He had detractors even in the churches that he himself started.

It is soulful to hear him describe himself as “unknown, and yet well known.” One can only imagine the pain concealed in those words. But here is why he was willing to suffer: “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints.”

Ministry has its own sufferings, its sorrows. In order to be like Christ, the shepherd must sacrifice himself for the sheep.

## Graciousness

**G**RACIOUSNESS IS AN UNUSUALLY soulful value for three reasons: it gives life, it shows a great love, and it enlarges the soul.

Graciousness is pure sweetness, and no book is more gracious than the Bible, which describes it as a primary attribute of God: “The Lord God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” “Gracious is the Lord, and righteous; our God is merciful.” “Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you, and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you.”

God was gracious to Abraham when he visited him in person to make a great promise. He was gracious to Israel when he freed them from slavery and brought them into the Promised Land in spite of their rebelliousness. The Psalms are full of the gracious love of the Lord, as are the prophets. His graciousness was seen most of all in this: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

Grace is narrowly defined as “the unmerited favor of God,” but graciousness has a smiling face and is supremely welcoming. Its expansive quality can be seen in the parable of the Prodigal Son. The son has acted spitefully, but the father is gracious when the penitent returns. He runs to greet him, full of warmth and joy, tripping down the lane and careless of his honor. He kills the fatted calf and throws a party.

This graciousness is soulful because it is rooted in the value of life, as the parable makes plain. When the older son objects that his father has violated the norms of judgment by embracing the prodigal, the father replies: “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.”

The father’s graciousness is the ticket to the party. This soulful idea sets the Bible apart from all other books. Only the Bible bases its promises of gladness on grace and not on works or judgment. All



other religions and philosophies require us to give ourselves gladness by good work of one kind or another. The Bible invites us to join the celebration by the grace of God.

And if life is the light of men, then the Bible is the only book that offers a path to gladness, since the only way to obtain life is through the graciousness of God, as represented by the father. “All flesh is grass”; no one can save himself from the grave by works. Our joy depends upon God’s graciousness, which he demonstrated when he sent his son to die for our sake.

The elder brother in the parable illustrates the problem with trying to obtain gladness through judgment. He thinks he can make himself happy by cutting his young sibling down to size. But it is impossible to obtain the happiness he desires—acceptance in the eyes of the father—an immortal identity—by condemning the son that the father loves. He winds up sounding like a party pooper.

Judgment leads to a small identity by tearing others down, while graciousness produces an expansive identity by granting life. The way to make the party guests happy is to be gracious to them, not to judge them based on what they’re wearing or what they bring. Paul says this about the church: “Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.” Graciousness is the goal of the New Testament letters.

Graciousness was embodied in Christ. The manger scene is impossibly gracious. God condescends to be born in a stable. Christ allowed himself to be baptized by John. His good news for the poor was “full of grace and truth.” He did not disdain those of low degree. Levi the publican made a feast for him, and he did not refuse to come. The religious leaders were shocked. His reply: “I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

One of our favorite examples of graciousness is his appearance on the Sea of Tiberius after the Resurrection. The disciples saw him walking along the shore, but when they reached him they saw that he had made them breakfast. The scene brings to mind one of the most gracious passages of all: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.” Paradise is restored. The happy days return when God walked with humankind in the Garden as a friend and was happy even to serve them.

Christ brought a gracious new spirit and sense of value into being through his great sacrifice. This gracious spirit is reflected in the

soulful language of the New Testament letters, which is full of sweetness and warmth. Here is a typical greeting from Paul: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge.”

His greeting to the Corinthians is a honeycake of graciousness. This was not because the Corinthian church had *earned* such a sweet greeting. As it turns out, Paul was writing to chastise them, not to praise them. But he gives them this sweetness as a gift. His language reflects the graciousness of the father to the prodigal son. It is soulful because it chooses kindness over judgment.

Here is an example of this same gracious spirit in John: “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.”

This is the language of a kindly shepherd addressing his flock in pure love. God has become the smiling father in the parable, and we are his prodigal sons. A great change has occurred: Christ has reconciled us to the Father through the cross. No longer does the Father have the face of wrath and disapproval seen in the Old Testament. No, through Christ and his gracious sacrifice we are now God’s children.

Graciousness is also the chief characteristic of Peter’s writing: “Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

This kind of soulful language cannot be found in any other ancient book. It is the product of grace. Just as the gracious love shown on the cross covers our sins, so we cover a multitude of sins when we lay down our own lives in order to love one another. To be stewards of God’s grace is to be gracious to our fellow believers

THE MOST SOULFUL BOOK

so that we can build up the church, the living body of Christ. In the New Testament letters, grace has a smiling and beautiful face.

## A remnant

**W**E HESITATE somewhat to bring up this topic, soulful as it is, because it seems a little obscure. On the other hand, based on what we see on the best-seller list, there is a good chance that anyone who is reading our little book is part of a remnant himself or herself and may appreciate a brief and perhaps encouraging word on the subject.

You may be surprised to hear that the Bible is the book of remnants; that is, of small groups of people who remain faithful to God and his love. In fact the text actually states this in a soulful prophecy in which God speaks:

But I will leave in your midst  
a people humble and lowly.  
They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord,  
those who are left in Israel;  
they shall do no injustice  
and speak no lies,  
nor shall there be found in their mouth  
a deceitful tongue.  
For they shall graze and lie down,  
and none shall make them afraid.

The remnant Zephaniah had in mind is described as sheep among the wolves. They seem afflicted and poor compared to the world around them—they are weak in the rapacity and selfishness that constitute strength in the world, perhaps—but they are strong in faith. Because of their love of God, they are not like the world. And therefore God promises to preserve them. The steadfast love to which they cling keeps them alive and strong.

In any given age it may seem that God and his goodness are being overwhelmed by the forces of darkness. It must have seemed that way to Noah. It must have seemed that way to Israel with its numerous enemies. It certainly seemed that way to Isaiah and Jeremiah, based on their own words, and to Elijah, who said “I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.” It seemed that way to Christ in the Garden, and to his followers after he ascended

and left them without a friend in the world—neither “the Jews” nor the Romans.

And yet in spite of the seeming randomness and entropy of history, somehow the remnant survives. We are reminded of the exiles returning from Babylon. Jerusalem had been destroyed and the Jews had been scattered. They wanted to rebuild the city wall in order to protect those who returned. But then they found the law and had it read aloud in the public square. The people were overwhelmed. They found themselves again. The *Word* was the true wall of Jerusalem, protecting the remnant from destruction.

Close call? Maybe. Or it could be that a point was being made. No matter how bad things seem, the Word survives, protecting those who love mercy, do justice, and walk humbly with their God. Ezra comforted the remnant that returned with these words: “And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.” These are words of great encouragement to the remnant of any age.

## A new identity

**T**HE IDEA of the remnant is soulful most of all because of identity. It is easy to feel a little lost like Elijah when we are isolated and alone. The sheer mass of the crowd is oppressive and makes us conscious of our nothingness. But the idea of the remnant restores identity. There is value in loving God and clinging to the rule of love, no matter how lonely we may feel. Those who do so obtain a desirable identity of their own.

Identity is important because we have souls and are therefore aware of the value of life. This awareness causes us to want an immortal identity. Meanwhile our unhappiness comes from the fact that it is impossible to obtain such an identity by mortal means. “I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind. What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.”

There is a wonderfully soulful promise about identity in the Bible, however. To those who persevere, God will give “a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.” We cannot obtain an immortal identity by mortal means, but we were created by a God who loves us, who in the act of creation set aside an identity for us, rooted in the infinite love of the creator for that which he creates.

The “new name” is a unique name. It is not John or Robert or Rachel, as fine and meaningful as those names might be. It is a name we do not share with anyone else because it reflects God’s specific intent in creating us. It is the ultimate customized name. Not only that, but this new name is *concealed* in us. It is a secret intimacy and knowledge reserved for us, indicating an indissoluble bond between us and the creator.

This new name is soulful because it is the name of the soul which we were given.

## Soulfulness for old men?

**W**E CONFESS that we, like Luther, did not have much use for Revelation when we were young. It seemed obscure, knotty, even caustic to our pert mind. This is partly due to our obtuseness, no doubt, but it may also be that Revelation is to some degree a book for old men; or at least, for them its soulfulness may come as an unexpected gift.

After all, it was written by a soulful old man, living in exile on his rock. Old men may seem dried up and useless to the world—or to themselves—but they do not lack a soul. They have the same need for the soul to be fed as anyone else. In Revelation there is a special kind of soulfulness that might not be fully apparent to young men or women. This is the soulfulness of restoration.

We ourselves had no perceived need for restoration when we were young. This is no longer the case, however. The soul, the sum of one's being, becomes worn down over time. The body begins to break down and lose its attractiveness; the mind becomes less nimble as the hopes and dreams of youth fade away. It is not in such things—in sense or in intellect—that the soul has any hope for restoration. No, it must look elsewhere if it wants gladness.

Revelation restores gladness through a vertical interruption; that is, through a startling encounter with the Other. It is full of strange and marvelous imagery. When we were young, we did not know quite what to make of this imagery. Was it mystical? We were not mystics. Was it encoded? We had no interest in esoteric wisdom. Was it anthropomorphic, like Mt. Olympus? We were skeptical of anthropomorphic gods.

Only now are we able to see that the strangeness of the imagery is restorative. It reaches into the realm of the Other. The world may grow old and familiar. Even Shakespeare no longer seems strange after all these years. He cannot feed the soul and its longing for something thrilling, something beyond its own limitations—but these words can: *The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in*

*a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters.*

God, as seen in John's Revelation, is the Stranger who renews the soul through his very strangeness, who gives it new colors, new life. *The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow.* It is the very strangeness of the image that makes it restorative. *His feet were like burnished bronze.* Old men know their feet are made of clay. The strangeness of the image gladdens the soul because they are no longer strangers to themselves. *His voice was like the roar of many waters.* Hear the words coming in the roar of, say, Niagara Falls, or waves pounding on the rocky Maine coast. *And they sang a new song.* A new song is just the elixir that is needed when all the old songs are used up, no?—including the pretty song we used to sing to ourselves about life and identity.

The “new song” came into being when Christ conquered death on the cross, overturning law and judgment and instituting the age of grace. Through the strange and thrilling imagery of Revelation, the newness of the song is just as present today as it ever was. The newness itself, we mean. The fresh start begins with the revelation that the Lamb is worthy to open the book of life *because he was slain.* He laid down this mortal life with all of its vanity and foolishness for the sake of eternal life. “For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

Hence the soulfulness of Revelation is intimately linked to the high value the Bible assigns to life. For that matter, the life that comes from God is the only value that can restore the soul, since it is the only value that exceeds its mortality. Poetry can't do it. Music falls short of the majesty of rushing waters. The world-soul has grown old and infinitely weary; poetry is dead. But it is still thrilling to think of the Lamb undoing the seals of the book of life.

In his vision, John sees an open door into heaven. He accepts the invitation from Christ to *Come up* and see things from a higher point of view. This indicates that Christ is the revelation. All things seen in the Old Testament were shadows of him and his concealed glory. Like Ezekiel, John sees a scroll with writing on both sides, but the additional writing is now revealed to be Christ himself, the word made flesh. The scroll is filled up, made complete in him. John has seen the marvel that Ezekiel could only guess at. Indeed, he has leaned against his bosom.

Leaning on Christ for restoration—that's what Revelation is all about. Its soulfulness begins with John's generous intentions. It is



meant to be a book of profound comfort and consolation to seven churches that were under severe persecution. Picture yourself in your first-century pew in Ephesus or Sardis. Christianity has not yet permeated the Western world. Indeed, it is a fledgling, under persecution not only by mighty Rome but by pitiless Jews from the “synagogue of Satan” who, like Saul, are trying to stamp it out before it gets a foothold.

John invokes the Stranger quality of God in order to console the sister churches, who are feeling very small in the time of Domitian and fierce imperial persecutions. “From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God.” Those torches are the persecuted churches. They are not forgotten. God literally has their back. He is coming in judgment, and their faith will be vindicated. The Empire and religious foes that seem so formidable now and are causing them so much grief are in fact sowing the seeds of their own destruction.

Up to this point, the apocalyptic vision is very much like the ones seen in Isaiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. But now something new is added: the Lamb bursts upon the scene. This is meant to show the persecuted churches that Christ is not the imposter the Jews claim he was but has actually ascended to the right hand of God. The scrolls described in those earlier visions remained sealed. Their full meaning could not be known because Christ had not yet come.

Christ had not yet shown that the way to obtain life is to lose it: “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.” The Lamb is worthy because he gave his life for the sake of the sheep. He laid down his own life only to take it up again.

Why is this important in context? Because John was writing to console and encourage the churches that were being persecuted. Many followers of Christ had already died and many more would die, but it was important for them to understand that they were laying down their lives only to take them up again. Those who kept the faith and did not bow down to the Beast would be saved.

The cross reveals the surprising graciousness of God. The Old Testament prophets could not have conceived of the kind of sacrifice Christ made. God’s own son laying down his life when we

are the ones who deserve punishment? This is astonishing. It is not an easy thing to grasp even today. This notion was not found in any other ancient book. It could not be fathomed through human reason or imagination. It had to be revealed.

It turns out that God had a plan all along for the restoration of life. Mortals could not do it because they were mortal. But God “so loved the world” that he did it himself. The Old Testament was based on the premise that following the law leads to life, but God had a different and far more wonderful plan in mind. Men cannot save themselves. They all fall short of the glory of God, which is his immortality. But he was willing to save them on the cross.

Christ is the revelation. John intimates this by invoking the most mind-boggling prophecies in all literature. He weeps when he sees that the scroll is sealed and there is no one who can open it, but an angel comforts him: “Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.” The Lion of Judah refers to an astonishing prophecy from all the way back in Genesis, when Jacob was blessing his sons:

Judah, your brothers shall praise you; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons shall bow down before you.  
 Judah is a lion's cub;  
     from the prey, my son, you have gone up.  
 He stooped down; he crouched as a lion  
     and as a lioness; who dares rouse him?  
 The scepter shall not depart from Judah,  
     nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,  
 until tribute comes to him;  
     and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.  
 Binding his foal to the vine  
     and his donkey's colt to the choice vine,  
 he has washed his garments in wine  
     and his vesture in the blood of grapes.  
 His eyes are darker than wine,  
     and his teeth whiter than milk.

Christ's kingship will be eternal. The scepter will not depart from him. He will come into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday in perfect meekness, riding on a donkey. He will wash his garments in the wine of his own blood. The meaning of this prophecy seems clear today, now that it has been revealed in Christ, but it was by no means clear in its own time. The meaning of “he has washed his garments in wine” could not have been known until Christ died on the cross or

until he said “this is my blood.”

Then John invokes another amazing prophecy with the “Root of David,” this one from Isaiah:

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,  
and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.  
And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him,  
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the Spirit of counsel and might,  
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.  
And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.  
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,  
or decide disputes by what his ears hear,  
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,  
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;  
and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,  
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.  
Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist,  
and faithfulness the belt of his loins.

A “Branch” from the stem of Jesse and the “Root of David” are one and the same thing, since Jesse was David’s father. But look at the type of Messiah being prophesied! There simply could not be any more soulful prophecy than this. He will not judge with his eyes but in wisdom and truth. He will come with judgment to vindicate the poor and the meek: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” He will bring peace: “The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them.”

Revelation is soulful because of the restoration of life. It was written to churches that had been undergoing persecution for decades, since the time of the “beast” emperor Nero, and thought themselves as good as dead. John seeks to rally them by unveiling God’s majesty and power, which cannot be seen by mortal eyes. Yes, they are being persecuted, perhaps unto death, but they are the firstfruits of a new kingdom, since it is through them and the rivers of their blood that the church is being established forever. Their suffering will be avenged. The enemies that were pursuing them would be destroyed in time. The Roman Empire, the “whore of Babylon” and “mother of all prostitutes,” a bastion of bottomless

immorality and cruelty, only seemed to be immortal. It was destined to fall into darkness.

Revelation is soulful because only life can satisfy the soul. Only Christ and his loving sacrifice can produce such supremely tender words as these: “They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Revelation ends with the appearance of the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven. David made Jerusalem a great city, but he was unable to make it live up to its name. “Jerusalem” can mean “the peace of God.” David was a sinner; he did not have the power to bring this peace to Earth. A very different kind of king was required—and a very different kind of kingdom.

This king was Christ, who is the “king of kings” but said his kingdom was “not of this world.” He restored peace between humankind and God, the peace that passes all understanding, through his blood. A new Jerusalem, a new kind of city, the bride of Christ, the church, comes down out of heaven by means of the cross. Paradise is restored by his great act of love.

## Taste and see!

**T**HERE ARE MANY more examples of great soulfulness in the Bible, filled with tenderness and love. We could go on and on, but perhaps you think we already have.

One thing that may seem surprising to some is the soulfulness of the Old Testament. There is a tendency to discount it in favor of the New, but it is full of treasures. It may be necessary to dig a little more deeply in order to find what we are looking for, but that's why this book was written, as a pointer to passages and stories that are very soulful and may not be as well-known as the life of Christ.

Now of course there are many great books and many soulful authors. Homer, Aeschylus, Augustine, Boethius, Shakespeare, Pascal, Wordsworth, Austen and Dostoevsky are just a few that come readily to mind. It is interesting to note that all of these authors sought to glorify God in their own way. This leads us to wonder if belief in God is a key to soulfulness in literature, for reasons that have already been explained.

We believe an interesting book could be written about the soulfulness of those authors as well; but our humble purpose has been to talk about the Bible. We have endeavored to show that the ancient summons is still relevant today—in fact more than ever for those who may feel that we live in a singularly unsoulful age:

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.

JAY TROTT

If these words stir something in you, some distant chord of tenderness or longing, then the Bible may have more soulfulness and gladness to offer than you realize. It is also the only book that can fully satisfy the soul, since it is the only book that can give life.

THE END

## Appendix A

<sup>1</sup>Modern materialism can make discussion of the *existence* of the soul quite challenging, which is why we are grateful for the following brilliant personal communication from Mr. Samuel Trott:

Where does the unity of atoms come from? How can there be trillions of particles that all have the same properties yet all occupy unique paths of space and time? One step back. What does our logic say? It seems we think through logic that everything has an explanation; however, this would mean every explanation also has an explanation, requiring an infinite number of explanations, meaning no matter how far you go back, you will never find a true preceding cause for existence. It is not even a house built on sand, but a house built on a vacuum. The infinite chasm of explanation sucks existence down into true nothingness. We are left with only one conceivable understanding, namely that on some level, existence is the way it is “just because.” It determined itself to have certain qualities and that's just the way it is. So the question might be asked, why would each individual particle determine itself to be the same as such an immense number of other particles, except with a unique path in space and time? Why are there not a plethora of strange, undefinable things around us that determined themselves to be something completely different from the norm? Does this not suggest there is some extremely complex existing entity organizing and designating these existing things into separate groups with certain features? NOT SO FAST! These things get shaky when you have a Steven Hawking around.

“Spontaneous creation is the reason there is something rather than nothing, why the universe exists, why we exist. It is not necessary to invoke God...to set the universe going.”—Stephen Hawking. *The Grand Design*

He is implying that existence determines itself independently of any cause or exterior influence. After all, a cause by definition must already be something that exists. So this means there are no rules of reason which we can use to say anything in particular (like God) must have caused an existence, or that the existence must have any certain properties we can infer.

What if this seemingly organized complexity of atomic particles actually just comes from a few simple existing things interacting with each other? Perhaps, in some event of determination of a few existences, there came about the existence of several forces that dispersed from a point through the dimensions of space and time. Each force had a few determined characteristics, like their interaction with the other forces and relative strength. Also the forces happened to determine in themselves some simple variations in their distribution in space, and from this, they were destabilized, and the chain reaction of unbalanced force made them dance around each other throughout their determined space. Then, this dance pushed regions of each force into separate spaces, and, due to the simple characteristics of each force, each region accumulated the same amount of force because this amount could balance with the other forces around it. These formed regions of forces in space are described as particles and waves, and the uniform accumulation of force in each of these accounts for the common properties of each type of wave and particle. From there, the imperfect distribution of these things further caused them to push and pull, balance and fall, forming atoms, molecules, dust, stars, and planets.

(Note when I say “determination of an existence,” I am referring to essentially the same thing as Dr. Hawking’s “spontaneous creation,” and for “determined characteristics,” I mean certain properties that have been spontaneously created in the creation. Also when I say “forces,” you generally find that these are what physicists call “fields.”)

But we now might ask, why would existence determine itself to consist of several forces which are similar in their characteristics of moving through time and space, having the essence of what we call a force, and interacting with each other in a rock-paper-scissorsque set of interrelationships that also allows for a relatively stable universe? This appears to be established towards a particular pattern, to me indicating a prior cause or intention. Does this indicate, once again, that there was some sort of organized coordination, which would require a greater, complex existing thing with intentional construction of derivative existences? Perhaps we cannot say this because we already established that traditional human logic cannot understand the ultimate self-determining nature and ability of existence. An alternative explanation comes in the form of theories like dark matter, or anti-matter theories, as well as multiple universe theories. They claim that our universe, in terms of the existing things we interact with, is not even close to containing the majority of existences, and that we do not know what else exists because our forces do not react with many others. And there may be intermediate existences that we interact with, yet only in terms of a few properties, like with dark matter (gravity/mass related/time space) forces. This more easily allows for a simple and non-dependent origin of the determined existence of things. Yet one problem might be that so many things coming into existence with unpredictable characteristics might create some highly destructive influences on nearly every other thing that exists. If this kind of interaction were the true state of things, it would not seem to make sense that an existence such as ours would be possible, where all forces in our world interact with each other, yet none of them show signs of interacting with existence outside our specific range of influence. Yet once again, this is not a clear or obvious indication of which ideas are best.

So I think it’s a good idea to move from what we think we know about our universe to what we think about ourselves and our own thoughts, for surely we know this better than all else. A naturalistic explanation using modern physics will tell you that thoughts are the collective signaling interactions carried by fluctuating ion charge gradients along the membranes of brain cells. In this system, one occurrence sets off another, and the forces contained within each particle push each other and pass the momentum through the group. Even while the ion gradient is being changed in a fluctuation signal through one part of a brain cell, the cell is already resetting the charge gradient directly behind it. There is little or no reason to suspect that each signal is not entirely separate from every other. Yes, the molecules are moving in ways that interact to bring about a combined result that allows a pattern of molecular organization to maintain its integrity, overall described as a human body, but they are in no way part of a single existential entity. You might say that maybe there is unity among things of a common force like the few foundational forces mentioned above, but there is no scientific reason why certain things in the brain with a certain type of force would have a form of unity, while other molecules in the brain with the same forces would not exhibit any unity with the former. If you suggest that conscious experience is a unity of the forces involved in a certain area of the nervous system, why would this unity not include the many



particles and waves in the rest of the nervous system and surrounding cells that are from the same forces, especially if those in the first set are in reality no more unified with each other than those in the second?

Now let's compare our indirect scientific investigations of thought to the direct and undoubtable experience of thinking. Think about the difference between how red appears to your mind and how green appears to your mind. Yes, you can describe how different wavelengths of light stimulate different patterns of brain signals, but it is impossible to describe with modern physics the difference between the experience of one color versus the experience of another. In addition, in scientific theory, as said above, there is no unity of different signals that make up a brain pattern, yet in the experience of the color red, the experience is one thing in itself. This is indisputable, for it is experienced directly. More than this, a person's entire field of view, olfactory senses, auditory senses, as well as internal dialog are experienced simultaneously as one consciousness. If you contemplate the difference between a sound experience and a taste experience, it is obvious that this cannot be explained by geometric and force relationships, no matter how complex, just as you can never make a stone house out of plastic. This difference between experience and physical science is to me a firm proof of how people have "souls" that are complex, wholly one, and separate from the physical world, though they are bound to live through certain parameters of specific physical bodies.

("Soul" here is meant to indicate something separate from the molecules of a human body, yet interacting with their forces, as they do with each other, but with far more complex parameters for these interactions that restrict interactions only to specific molecules in the nervous system.)

We have a hidden bias that I'd like to point out. It is a general guiding principle in scientific investigation that the simplest explanation is the best explanation. With the intense complexity required for what I just described, many probably will be itching to object. However, though I think that this principle is a good and important principle, it is meant for hypothesizing about things we do not know, so we do not create unnecessarily elaborate scenarios that require more and more proof for each additional complexity. It prevents us from jumping too far ahead with our imagination and ignoring reality. Conscious experience is the most direct reality we are capable of knowing, and these ideas do not take leaps of imagination, but simply go from one point to another.

Next, we come to what this separate conscious experience suggests. Why would a separate, complex existing thing determine itself to exist entirely restricted to a very specific pattern set of separate physical occurrences within a physical system? Why does it seem oriented to have a certain trend of occurrences that it follows? (Why would it only respond and depend on the interactions of one part of a nervous system?) Why, if things are as inductive logic suggests, is this same determined relationship found with other complex, non-physical existences attaching themselves to specific patterns in all human bodies (if not others, like animals)? The only explanation that seems to fit the facts is a higher, overarching, extremely powerful and complex existence that has intentionally crafted, organized, and designated these soulful existences to their physical counterparts. Overarching and high because it influences forces and existing things of many kinds and extents, and powerful for the same reason: complex because of the bringing together of many different properties under its influence and applying relations between existing things based on properties that are complex compiled constructs of simple forces;

intentionally crafting because the complex distinctions coming from its influence do not go in any random direction, indicating that its influence tends towards something favorable (not in the probability sense) for itself; organized because it designates certain physical parameters for the conscious experience (what I'll call soul) to neural net relationships which are not derived from the properties of the forces that make the physical world.

Here's another experience-versus-physical comparison, based on the idea that our bodies are made of many parts consisting of atoms and such. Think again of things we know directly, including consciousness, thought, sensations and all the rest. What are they like? What is it like to have them? Wouldn't it be fair to refer to each of them as being like an impulse of experience? It is hard to describe the essence of what these are, but I think you will know what I'm talking about. Now wouldn't it also make sense that the substrate body to which a soul is attached (or even more so if there is no soul and we are truly only the things we physically observe to be in the brain)—wouldn't it make sense that these things that form our foundation consist of the same essence as things that are in our thoughts? Given that we have our origin in these physical things, wouldn't they have to have in themselves all the things we have and be of the same basic nature? Following this logic, it would make sense that when forces and particles are acting on each other, they are essentially existing and doing so through "feelings" or experiential impulses. Given this perspective, wouldn't it even further make sense that these things have likely been "felt" or willed into existence by an overarching experiential being of the same essence?

Let's hypothesize that an extremely powerful being has intentionally brought about our existence. All things that come from it would naturally get their qualities from it, at least in a basic sense. In addition, the organized nature of the things it has formed would suggest that the being acted with intention. So, *why* would the being have this intention, or *what* is this intention? To me the only way to see this is to look at what exists and think about what could motivate such things. One problem is that we can never know just how much the being has formed and what these things are like, but it seems reasonable to take heart in the things we can see, because the existence of many things can never disprove the properties of a few existing things. Existence is existence; this is immutable.

For one thing, the idea that such a knowledgeable being finds some things worthwhile to pursue with intentional actions seems to support the idea that there may be some things that are inherently valuable and good. Now of course it is entirely possible that this being would consider "good" and "bad" to be derived valuations, meaningless things, and would act on feeling simply because there is no reason not to act. But what about the existence of desire? Does it perhaps necessitate an inherent truth of value? Such things are confusing, to say the least. If logic can be inherent, can value be as well? Look at what we humans are. If such a being has formed us and our traits, certainly our traits reflect at least a part of what it desired. I would suggest that humans would actually be the greatest clue we have to what such a being would desire, because we are the most complex and intentionally powerful things that we have found so far in our world. In addition, it seems we have at least some importance due to the intentional designation of conscious experience to our specific physical bodies.

It helps to keep in mind that every concept we form would have to be known by the being that organizes our existence; we could not accuse it of ignorance or

inability to relate. Whatever this being could be, it would have to know what feeling, loving, hating, valuing, and living are like. It seems that it would also find these things important because they are the central focuses of human life and probably of most animal life. It also seems that love and desire are most important in the minds of all humans because they ultimately fuel every action. Indeed, it seems this powerful being would value desire because it acted with intent, which always originates from desire of some kind. I think desire also depends on a belief in value, and a belief in value depends on a belief that there is absolute, inherent value. In order to desire something, you must have an appreciation for some of its qualities. If you do not believe something is inherently valuable, then you do not believe it has any value at all, for it would have to get its value from something else. If you believe that nothing has inherent value, then you can't believe that anything is valuable, because everything would be dependent on some other source for value, yet no other source would have its own value to lend. You cannot appreciate something if you believe it has no value, so you would not desire it either. So, it seems that, if the being we have in mind did act out of desire, as shown by the character of its actions, then it must also believe that the object of its desire is inherently valuable. Considering that this being would be far more intelligent than any human, knowing any ideas we have on this topic anyway, it seems wise and sound to agree with it and affirm that there is true, inherent value. (That's one suggestion as to establishing that God as described would be proof of transcendent morality.)

Love is often described as a chemical reaction. People say they don't believe this makes love meaningless. They believe love has value that goes beyond matter, in spite of the paradigm; but in arguing for the transcendent value of love it seems to me they implement a well-disguised picture of the soul. In other words, they forget about what the objective scientific knowledge tells them, and conclude love is meaningful because it feels meaningful in their subjective experience. Here is an example from an online article:

Like Birds of Paradise continuously selecting for brighter and brighter plumage, love—*itself*—caused those with it to select those who demonstrated more and more of it. Those with greater bonding capacity, passed it on, while those without it met with less success. Eventually that capacity for bonding with its own kind reached the stage where we're at today—and in English we label that profound emotional bond, "love". (But mom simply calls it, "Oxytocin"—she's such a romantiel)

This misses the gestalt of a thing. "A system of phenomena or integral pattern that forms a functioning unit in which the whole is more than the sum of its constituent parts." Love may have been that. Love may be that. But for us, it's so much more. I couldn't care less if I'm a deterministic ugly bag of mostly water. . . it still feels real and feels important.

We've grown beyond simple evolutionary pressures. The fortuitous gifts of our evolutionary history have accumulated into a species in which the total sum of those individual gifts (emotions, logic, curiosity, creativity, order, chaos, pattern recognition, bravery, etc.) is far greater than each of them alone. Taken one by one, they'd be very interesting. Crammed together into one brain, they deliver a creature of extraordinary purpose and value.

<https://www.quora.com/Is-love-just-a-chemical-trick-of-the-brain-to-help-pass-on-genes>

This is consistent with modern physics in its perspective, but I see something different in mine. They quote that the whole can be more than the sum of its parts.

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By nature, this statement indicates that the whole has a character different than all its parts taken together. This is contrary to one of the fundamental laws of science, which states that matter and energy cannot be created or destroyed; yet it is implemented because it is clear that the subjective experience, the human experience, the conscious experience, does not logically match up with the character of chemical and electrical processes alone. The writer embraces the feeling of emotions, citing their undeniable experienced character and the fact that they are known to be what they are, and also admits that the chemical explanation itself doesn't have too much appeal, even though that doesn't ultimately matter. This implies to me that they are actually pointing out a logical discrepancy between brain processes and the feeling of their emotions.

In summary, it seems to me that people who hold this type of view may reject the idea of mind-body or soul-brain dualism in word, but their ultimate beliefs revert to a kind of soul by another name. After all, if a person is a soul, it takes a lot of convincing to get them to reject all things soul-like.

## **Appendix B: Scripture References by Chapter**

### **An Invitation**

Come, everyone who thirsts...Isaiah 55:1-2

### **The soul delights in life**

Then the Lord God...Genesis 2:7

In him was life...John 1:4

All flesh is grass...Isaiah 40:6

All have sinned...Romans 3:23

O God, you are my God...Psalm 63:1

For what does it profit a man...Mark 8:36

And he said, 'I will do this'...Luke 12:18-19

Fool! This night...Luke 12:20-21

### **Soulfulness is rooted in love**

God is love...1 John 4:16

For God so loved the world...John 3:16

By this we know love...1 John 3:16

Very good...Genesis 1:31

One flesh...Mark 10:8

Do them, that you may live...Deuteronomy 4:1

You shall love the Lord...Luke 10:27

Then the King will say...Matthew 25:34-40

Gladden the soul of your servant...Psalm 86:4-5

But God, being rich...Ephesians 2:4-7

You shall not take vengeance...Leviticus 19:18

Do not say, 'I will repay evil'...Proverbs 20:22

For I desire steadfast love...Hosea 6:6

But if there is harm...Exodus 21:23

You have heard that it was said...Matthew 5:38-41

Blessed are the merciful...Matthew 5:7

When his fellow servants...Matthew 18:31-35

For I the Lord love justice...Isaiah 61:8

I hate, I despise your feasts...Amos 5:21-24

By justice a king...Proverbs 29:4

For the word...Psalm 33:4

Behold my servant...Isaiah 42:1-4

### **Love is indicated by humility and gentleness**

What does the Lord require of you...Micah 6:8

All flesh is grass...Isaiah 40:6

All we like sheep...Isaiah 53:6

Surely there is not a righteous man...Ecclesiastes 7:20

The heart is deceitful above all things...Jeremiah 17:9

Humble yourselves before the Lord...James 4:10

If my people who are called...2 Chronicles 7:14

And the Lord your God will circumcise...Deuteronomy 30:6

Circumcise yourselves to the Lord...Jeremiah 4:4

Bread of heaven...John 6:51  
Take my yoke upon you...Matthew 11:29-30  
Count equality with God...Philippians 2:6-8  
I am the bread of life...John 6:48-51  
He will tend his flock...Isaiah 40:11  
This took place to fulfill...Matthew 21:4-5  
Love is patient and kind...1 Corinthians 13:4  
I therefore, a prisoner...Ephesians 4:1-3

**Humility means choosing the cross over the sword**

For out of Zion shall go the law...Isaiah 2:1-5.  
For all who take the sword...Matthew 26:52  
It is because of the wickedness...Deuteronomy 9:4  
No one is righteous—not even one...Romans 3:10  
The race is not to the swift...Ecclesiastes 9:11  
Judge not, that you be not judged...Matthew 7:1

**Soulfulness and resistance**

If anyone would come after me...Luke 9:23  
For the commandments...Romans 13:9  
Do not love the world...1 John 2:15-17  
Sojourners and exiles...1 Peter 2:11  
Foxes have holes...Luke 9:58  
Despised and rejected...Isaiah 53:3

**Resistance leads to suffering**

These things I command you...John 15:17-20  
He was despised and rejected...Isaiah 53:3-5  
Walk in a manner worthy...Ephesians 4:1-3

**Soulfulness in the Old Testament**

For while we were still weak...Romans 5:6  
Stiff-necked people...Exodus 3:29  
This at last is bone of my bones...Genesis 2:23  
The man and his wife...Genesis 2:25  
Cursed is the ground...Genesis 3:17  
I will put enmity...Genesis 3:15  
This is the sign of the covenant...Genesis 9:12-17  
And the Lord appeared to him...Genesis 18:1  
Many nations...Genesis 17:4  
Lamb of God who takes away...John 1:29  
Lamb without blemish...Exodus 12:9  
And I, when I am lifted up...John 12:32  
Whoever exalts himself will be humbled...Matthew 23:12  
Moses was very meek...Numbers 12:3  
Slow of speech...Exodus 4:10  
I am the good shepherd...John 10:11  
The last will be first...Matthew 20:16  
A man after [God's] own heart...1 Samuel 13:14

## THE MOST SOULFUL BOOK

And the king was deeply moved...2 Samuel 18:33  
The Lord is near to the brokenhearted...Psalm 34:18  
Have mercy on me, O God...Psalm 51:1-2  
Blessed are those who mourn...Matthew 5:4  
He who goes out weeping...Psalm 126:6  
The God of Israel has spoken...2 Samuel 23:3-4  
Although my house be not so with God...2 Samuel 23:5

### **Many kinds of bondage**

Bondage to corruption...Romans 8:21  
And the whole congregation...Exodus 16:2-3  
Stiff-necked people...Exodus 3:29  
Yet it was I who taught Ephraim...Hosea 11:3-4  
How can I give you up, O Ephraim?...Hosea 11:8-9  
Chosen people...Deuteronomy 7:6  
Know, therefore, that the Lord ...Deuteronomy 9:6-7

### **Lamentations**

How lonely sits the city...Lamentations 1:1-2  
The elders of the daughter of Zion...Lamentations 2:10-12  
Jerusalem sinned grievously...Lamentations 1:8  
He has made my flesh...Lamentations 3:4  
All our enemies open...Lamentations 3:46-51  
My soul continually remembers...Lamentations 3:20-24

### **The prophets**

The Lord passed before him...Exodus 34:6-7  
God is love...1 John 4:16  
What to me is the multitude...Isaiah 1:11-13  
Wash yourselves...Isaiah 1:16-17  
If you take away the yoke...Isaiah 58:9-12  
Hear this, you who trample...Amos 8:4-7  
Comfort, comfort my people...Isaiah 40:1-2  
For he grew up before him...Isaiah 53:2-6  
He will not cry aloud...Isaiah 42:2-3  
The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me...Isaiah 61:1-3  
Yet it was the will of the Lord...Isaiah 53:10-11  
And you shall know that I am the Lord...Ezekiel 37:13-14  
Thus says the Lord of hosts ...Jeremiah 31:23-25  
Trust in the Lord forever...Isaiah 26:4-6  
Every valley shall be lifted up...Isaiah 40:4-5

### **Wisdom is soulful**

All flesh is grass...Isaiah 40:6  
Blessed is the one who finds wisdom...Proverbs 3:13-17  
I thank you, Father...Luke 10:21  
The fear of the Lord...Proverbs 9:10  
God is love...1 John 4:16  
My son, if sinners entice you...Proverbs 1:10

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The wages of sin is death...Romans 6:23  
Do not plan evil against your neighbor...Proverbs 3:29  
Go to the ant, O sluggard...Proverbs 6:6  
Treasures gained by wickedness...Proverbs 10:2  
Wisdom cries aloud in the street...Proverbs 1:20  
For whoever finds me finds life...Proverbs 8:35  
For the commandment is a lamp...Proverbs 6:23-24  
Blessings are on the head of the righteous...Proverbs 10:6  
A man who is kind benefits himself...Proverbs 11:17  
Whoever trusts in his riches will fall...Proverbs 11:28  
You cannot serve God and money...Matthew 6:24  
For what does it profit a man...Mark 8:36  
I made great works...Ecclesiastes 4:4-7  
I also gathered for myself silver...Ecclesiastes 4:8  
I got singers...Ecclesiastes 4:8  
Then I considered...Ecclesiastes 4-11  
For of the wise...Ecclesiastes 4:16  
For everything there is a season...Ecclesiastes 3:1  
Then I saw that all toil...Ecclesiastes 4:4  
There is nothing better...Ecclesiastes 4:24  
Sweet is the sleep...Ecclesiastes 5:12  
All flesh is grass...Isaiah 40:6  
It is good that you should take hold...Ecclesiastes 7:18  
Blameless and upright...Job 1:8  
Why is light given to him...Job 3:20-26  
Where were you when I...Job 38:4-7  
For I know that my Redeemer lives...Job 19:25

### **Love poetry as well!**

Sustain me with raisins...Song of Solomon 2:5  
My beloved is to me a satchet of myrrh...Song of Solomon 1:13-15  
The voice of my beloved... Song of Solomon 2:8-9  
I sought him, but found him not... Song of Solomon 5:6-7  
I adjure you, O daughters... Song of Solomon 5:2:7  
But from the beginning of creation...Mark 10:6-9  
What is your beloved... Song of Solomon 5:9  
His mouth is most sweet... Song of Solomon 5:16  
My beloved speaks and says to me... Song of Solomon 2:10-13  
You are the most handsome...Psalm 45:2-4  
Hear, O daughter, and consider...Psalm 45:10-15  
And she said...Ruth 1:15-17  
You shall be a crown of beauty...Isaiah 62:3-5  
The one who has the bride...John 3:29-30  
Husbands, love your wives...Ephesians 5:25-27  
Then I heard what seemed...Revelation 19:6-8

### **The Psalms**

Blessed is the man...Psalm 1:1-2  
He is like a tree...Psalm 1:3



## THE MOST SOULFUL BOOK

All we like sheep have gone astray...Isaiah 53:6  
For I was envious...Psalm 73:3-6  
All in vain...Psalm 73:13-14  
But when I thought...Psalm 73:16-18  
When my soul was embittered...Psalm 73:21-22  
Nevertheless, I am continually...Psalm 73:23-24  
Steadfast love and faithfulness meet...Psalm 85:10  
Righteousness and peace...Psalm 85:10  
My sin is ever before me...Psalm 51:3  
The sacrifices of God...Psalm 51:17  
Cast me not away...Psalm 51:11  
Create in me a clean heart...Psalm 51:10  
Sing to the Lord a new song...Psalm 98:1  
Out of the depths...Psalm 130:1  
My soul waits for the Lord...Psalm 130:6  
But he himself went...1 Kings 19:4  
Still, small voice...1 Kings 19:11  
I wait for the Lord...Psalm 130:5  
O Israel, hope in the Lord!...Psalm 130:7  
Why are you cast down...Psalm 42:5  
Let me hear joy and gladness...Psalm 51:8  
When the Lord restored...Psalm 126:1  
How lovely is your dwelling place...Psalm 84:1  
My soul longs...Psalm 84:2  
He makes me lie down...Psalm 23:2  
He leads me in the paths...Psalm 23:3  
Even though I walk...Psalm 23:4  
God has taken his place...Psalm 82:1  
How long will you judge...Psalm 82:2  
Rescue the weak...Psalm 82:4  
Make a joyful noise...Psalm 98:4-9  
I will sing of loyalty...Psalm 101:1  
God is love...1 John 4:16  
For his steadfast love...Psalm 136:1  
I lift up my eyes...Psalm 121:1  
The LORD is your keeper...Psalm 121:5  
The LORD will keep you from all evil...Psalm 121:7  
Love your enemies...Matthew 5:44  
For without cause...Psalm 35:7-9  
Queen in gold of Ophir...Psalm 45:9  
Let it be to me...Luke 1:38

### **Magnificat**

Vanity of vanities...Ecclesiastes 2:1  
My soul magnifies the Lord...Luke 1:46  
All flesh is grass...Isaiah 40:6  
He has driven and brought me...Lamentations 3:2  
He has scattered the proud...Luke 1:51  
He has brought down the mighty...Luke 1:52

**The Messiah and his mission**

Go and tell John...Matthew 11:4-6  
That they may have life...John 10:10

**Water for thirsty souls**

Come, everyone who thirsts...Isaiah 55:1  
As a deer pants...Psalm 42:1  
There is a river whose streams...Psalm 46:4  
If anyone thirsts...John 7:37-39  
I will sprinkle clean water...Ezekiel 36:25-27  
Then he brought me back...Ezekiel 47:1  
Destroy this temple...John 2:9  
Everyone who drinks...John 4:13  
Then the angel showed me...Rev. 22:1-3

**His teachings**

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...Luke 4:18  
Blessed are the poor in spirit...Matthew 5:3  
Went away sorrowful...Matthew 19:22  
Easier for a camel...Mark 10:25  
Every valley shall be lifted up...Isaiah 40:4  
He has brought down the mighty...Luke 1:52  
Do not lay up for yourselves treasures...Matthew 6:19  
But God said to him...Luke 12:20  
You open your hand...Psalm 145:16  
All is vanity...Ecclesiastes 1:2  
Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious...Matthew 6:25-26  
And which of you by being anxious...Luke 12:25  
And why are you anxious about clothing?...Matthew 6:28  
Come to me, all who labor...Matthew 11:28  
Blessed are the meek...Matthew 5:5  
You have heard that it was said...Matthew 5:43-44

**The soulfulness of true religion**

Behold, you fast only...Isaiah 58:4-8  
Watch and beware...Matthew 16:6  
Beware of practicing...Matthew 6:1-2  
And when you pray...Matthew 6:5-6  
They do all their deeds...Matthew 23:5-6  
Woe to you, scribes...Matthew 23:27-28  
Religion that is pure and undefiled...James 1:27  
And behold, a woman...Luke 7:37-38  
If this man were a prophet...Luke 7:39  
Do you see this woman?...Luke 7:44-47  
You shall love the Lord...Deuteronomy 6:5  
I know your works...Revelation 3:15-17

**A tenderhearted love**

## THE MOST SOULFUL BOOK

He had compassion...Mark 6:34  
Love one another...John 13:34  
Let not your hearts be troubled...John 14:1  
Peace I leave with you...John 14:27  
As the Father has loved me...John 15:9-11  
Woman, behold, your son...John 19:26

### **Setting his face like a flint**

But the Lord God helps me...Isaiah 50:7-8  
When the days drew near...Luke 9:51  
By this we know love...1 John 3:16  
For the king trusts in the LORD...Psalm 21:7  
God is love...1 John 4:16  
For this reason...John 10:17  
If anyone would come after me...Luke 9:23

### **Do not judge**

Judge not, that you be not judged...Matthew 7:1-3  
Knowledge of good and evil...Genesis 2:1  
I tell you, not even in Israel...Luke 7:9  
Truly I tell you, this poor widow...Mark 12:43  
You have heard that it was said...Matthew 5:27

### **A stout resistance**

I have given them...John 17:14  
You cannot serve God and money...Luke 16:13  
For the letter kills...2 Corinthians 3:6  
The law is spiritual...Romans 7:14  
They tie up heavy burdens...Matthew 23:24  
But a shadow of the good things...Hebrews 10:1  
And the Pharisees were saying...Mark 2:24-28  
God, I thank you that I am...Luke 18:9-14  
All have sinned and fall short...Romans 3:23

### **The Suffering Servant**

He is despised and rejected by men...Isaiah 53:3-4  
A prophet is not without honor...Mark 6:4  
As he went away from there...Luke 11:53  
So the chief priests and the Pharisees...John 11:47-53  
Now he told a parable...Luke 14:7-11  
Therefore God has highly exalted him...Philippians 2:9-11

### **Messengers of love**

God is love...1 John 4:16  
Merciful and gracious, slow to anger...Psalm 145:8  
That which was from the beginning...1 John 1:1  
A new commandment I give to you...John 13:34  
Whoever says he is in the light...1 John 2:9  
Beloved, let us love one another...1 John 4:7

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A new commandment...John 13:34-35  
So then you are no longer strangers...Ephesians 2:19-20  
Rather, speaking the truth in love...Ephesians 4:15-16  
For this reason I bow...Ephesians 3:14-17

### **The soulfulness of Paul**

Unity of the Spirit...Ephesians 4:3  
I therefore, a prisoner...Ephesians 4:1  
Still more excellent way...1 Corinthians 12:31  
For just as the body is one...1 Corinthians. 12:12  
If I speak in the tongues...1 Corinthians 13:1-7  
Your boasting is not good...1 Corinthians 5:6  
For there is no distinction...Romans 3:23  
There is neither Jew nor Greek,...Galatians 3:28  
The parts of the body...1 Corinthians 12:22  
For I do not do the good...Romans 7:19  
Wretched man that I am!...Romans 7:24  
Thanks be to God...Romans 7:25  
There is therefore now no condemnation...Romans 8:1  
Who shall separate...Romans 8:35-39

### **Bear one another's burdens**

And they devoted themselves...Acts 2:42-45  
So if there is any encouragement...Philippians 2:1-4  
And do not grieve the Holy Spirit...Ephesians 4:30  
Bless those who persecute you...Romans 12:14-18  
Having purified your souls...1 Peter 1:22-2:3  
In this is love...1 John 4:10  
God is love...1 John 4:16-18  
Bear one another's burdens...Galatians 6:2  
We are treated as imposters...2 Corinthians 6:8  
Now I rejoice...Colossians 1:24

### **Graciousness**

The Lord God is merciful...Exodus 34:6  
Gracious is the Lord...Psalm 116:5  
Therefore the Lord longs to be gracious...Isaiah 30: 18-19  
For God so loved the world...John 3:16  
Son, you are always with me...Luke 15:31  
Therefore welcome one another...Romans 15:17  
I have not come to call...Luke 5:32  
Behold, I stand at the door...Revelation 3:20  
Grace to you and peace...Philippians 1:2  
See what kind of love...1 John 3:1-3  
Above all, keep loving...1 Peter 4:8-11

### **A remnant**

But I will leave in your midst...Zephaniah 3:12  
I, even I only, am left...1 Kings 19:10

**A new identity**

I have seen everything...Ecclesiastes 1:14

A white stone...Revelation 2:17

**Soulfulness for old men?**

The hairs of his head were white...Revelation 1:14-15

And they sang a new song...Revelation 5:9-10

For whoever would save his life...Luke 9:24

Synagogue of Satan...Revelation 2:9

From the throne came flashes...Revelation 4:5

Worthy are you to take the scroll...Revelation 5:9-10

Weep no more...Revelation 5:5

Judah, your brothers shall praise you...Genesis 49:8-12

There shall come forth a shoot...Isaiah 11:1-5

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...Luke 4:18-19

They shall hunger no more...Revelation 7:16-17

**Taste and see**

Isaiah 55:1-4

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jay Trott is an author of essays and fiction who lives in sunny Connecticut with his wife Beth. They have four children, two sons-in-law, two grandchildren and love long walks and good company.