



Does the Bible teach we have an Immortal Soul?

The Unkillable Soul Versus Conditionalism



Matthew 10:28 is a watershed text. It serves as a rope, and on either side of the rope is a group of well-meaning Christians tugging over the issue of human nature and destiny. On the one side are those who teach innate immortality. These draw support from Matthew 10:28a, where Jesus compares the body, which can be killed by other men, to the soul, which cannot. This side of the debate believes that “in death, the body only dies; but the soul lives on uninterrupted, and is immortal.”¹

On the other side of the rope are conditionalists. We tend to emphasize Matthew 10:28b, where Jesus speaks of God being able to destroy both soul and body in Gehenna hell. We reason that anything that can be destroyed is not by nature immortal. We do not believe that Matt. 10:28 presupposes a sharp division between body and soul in which the ‘soul’ is the more important, immortal part.”² We see that presupposition as reading into the text of Matthew 10:28a a dualistic view of the nature of humanity which is not reflected in the rest of Scripture, and essentially denies the reality of death. In a recent article on this text, David Burge summarized a conditionalist approach:

1. The Bible affirms that death is a real event which affects the whole person.
2. In hell, the lost will suffer complete destruction; no part of them will survive.
3. Jesus is teaching that the first death is only temporary. The resurrection will reverse it.
4. Jesus is teaching about the nature of God here, not the nature of man. Believers should fear God, not human persecutors.³

Psuché in Matthew

If our brothers with the innate immortality view are right, Jesus is affirming something about the nature of humanity in Matthew 10:28a. He is teaching that there is a part of every human being that God has made indestructible. This is the soul. One way of assessing the validity of that interpretation is to cross-reference each occurrence of the word soul (psuché in Greek) as it appears in Matthew's Gospel. This should help us grasp how Matthew understood the term – whether or not he understood it as an immortal part of every human being.

Matthew 2:20

The first occurrence of psuché in Matthew comes from the mouth of the Angel of the Lord. He tells Joseph that it is safe to return to Israel from Egypt because those who sought Jesus' life are dead. The word the angel uses for life is psuché. It is clear that the angel is speaking about Herod's desire to kill Jesus, to prevent him from challenging the authority of the Herodian dynasty. There is absolutely no way to read into this statement any affirmation of human immortality. Perhaps this is the reason that the translators of many versions render the term psuché as life in this passage. Matthew is using the word psuché as the Old Testament⁴ usually does: as a reference to the life of the whole person.

Matthew 6:25

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus uses the term psuché to talk about human appetites. He tells his disciples not to worry about their psuché: "what you will eat or what you will drink." This is a significant text in the debate for two reasons: 1) these are the words of Jesus, so they reflect how Jesus used the term psuché; 2) Jesus also used the word body (soma) in the same verse. Crucial to the innate immortality position is the assumption that body and soul are contrasting terms. Yet, in this passage body and soul are not contrasted. Both body and soul are terms which imply the earthly, fleshly appetites. The body is concerned with what it will wear, and the soul is concerned with its next meal. Clearly Jesus is not teaching that what one eats and drinks is more important than what one wears. He is not contrasting the soul with the body. Both soul and body are used here to refer to earthly, fleshly appetites of the whole person. Nor is Jesus downplaying the importance of these human needs. He is merely teaching that the kingdom of God is more important. That is what believers should concern themselves over.⁵

Matthew 10:39

Another significant use of psuché by Matthew occurs just eleven verses after 10:28. This is within the most immediate context. The situation and audience is

the same: Jesus is preparing the twelve disciples for the mission to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.⁶ The threat is the same: believers are risking their lives if they proclaim the gospel. They will find that even the members of their own households will turn against them.⁷ To be a true believer is to face the sword⁸ and take up one's cross.⁹ Yet, Jesus is not telling his disciples that it is only their bodies that are threatened. He is actually encouraging them to surrender their souls to be killed. He tells them "If you cling to your life, you will lose it; but if you give up your life for me, you will find it" (NLT). Once again, the word life in that passage refers to the present life of the whole person, not an immaterial essence that survives death. But that term, life, is a translation of the same Greek word, *psuché*. If Jesus had meant to affirm that the soul is an immortal part of the human being that cannot die, why did he use the very same word to refer to the human life, which, by definition is mortal and in threat of dying? What is more, he is using the same term in the same message to the same audience. So, conditionalists cannot accept the interpretation of Matthew 10:28a that insists that soul and body are separate anthropological entities, one of which is indestructible and the other is destructible. That interpretation contradicts what Jesus says in the four most important contexts of Matthew 10:28a. It requires that Matthew 10:28b be reread: anything that is indestructible cannot be destroyed, even by God. Therefore the innate immortality view insists that Jesus is talking about the perpetual torture of human souls, not their destruction. It requires that the same term be translated "life," in 2:20 and 10:39, because the idea of an immortal soul cannot fit those texts. It also downplays the strong connection that the soul has with the body, as seen in 6:25.

Matthew 11:29

Expanding the contextual boundaries a bit further, we find Jesus promising rest for the souls of those who take his yoke upon themselves. Jesus could not have been referring to merely the immaterial essences of the disciples, because in the previous verse he had said the same thing without using the word *psuché*: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28) Here Jesus uses the term *psuché* the same way as he did in the previous passages in Matthew: as a synonym for the whole person. It parallels the pronoun "you."

Matthew 12:18

In the next chapter, Matthew quotes Isaiah 42:1-3, which definitely does refer to an immortal soul. Unfortunately for the innate immortality view, that immortal soul is God's soul. The text cannot prove anything about human souls. But in this text

as well, the best way to understand God's use of the word soul is as a parallel to the "I" in the same verse.

Matthew 16:25-26

In chapter 16, Jesus repeats the same admonition that he gave his disciples in 10:39. Jesus is about to go to the cross, , take up their crosses, and follow him. If they try to save their lives (by rejecting him) they will lose their lives. If they lose their lives (by being killed along with him) they will find them.

Here a rather peculiar thing happens. The word *psuché* appears in this passage four times: twice in v.25, and twice in v.26. Many of the modern translations render it as life in v. 25, and soul in v. 26. Apparently, the only reason for doing so is that v. 26, taken out of its context, could be used to contrast the soul with the body. In its context, however, v. 26 is saying the same thing that Jesus has said before: personal safety is not worth rejecting him.

In chapter 20, Jesus uses the term *psuché* referring to himself. He said that he came "to give his life as a ransom for many." Again, the best translation for the term *psuché* is the English word life. It is clear that Jesus is referring to his impending death at Calvary. By his physical death on the cross, Jesus drank from the cup that led to atonement for the sins of the world. By dying that death, Jesus gave his "soul." If the soul of every human being is immortal, then Jesus' soul could not die. But if Jesus' soul could not die, how could he give it as the world's ransom?

Matthew 22:37

In chapter 22, Jesus quotes from the Old Testament again. He had been asked which is the greatest commandment. He replied that it involved loving the Lord with all one's heart, soul, and mind. Despite the fact that this text is a favorite of preachers due to its built-in three points, it is best to see "heart, soul and mind" as an example of hendiatries. Jesus is emphasizing complete devotion to God. He is not teaching anthropology. Any of the three terms in this verse could have been used alone to convey the idea of complete devotion. Together they maximize the same emphasis.

Matthew 26:38

The final example of *psuché* in Matthew's Gospel is a quote from Jesus to his disciples at Gethsemane. He is in agony as he prays in the garden, knowing that his death is immanent. He explains to the disciples that his soul is "very sorrowful, even to death" and asks them to remain there with him and "watch." It

is clear from Matthew's description of the event that Jesus' body was also sorrowing. In fact, Matthew had said the same thing of the whole Jesus in v.37: "he began to be sorrowful and troubled." So, once again, Matthew is using the term *psuché* as a parallel to a pronoun.

The Lucan Parallel

Luke 12:4 offers a synoptic view of the same statement as Matthew 10:28. Luke has Jesus saying "do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do." Luke does not even mention the *psuché*, thus avoids the perception of dualism, perhaps because he was writing to a Gentile audience who would have been more prone to dualistic thought. His emphasis was the same as that of Matthew. He was encouraging commitment to God rather than fear of man. The death that the persecutors threaten is a real death, but it is merely a temporary one. The cost of rejecting Christ is permanent destruction in Gehenna at the final judgment.

What Matthew 10:28a Does Not Imply

Having surveyed every use of *psuché* in Matthew, and looked at the only synoptic parallel passage, we are now prepared to infer from our text what it does not imply. It does not imply an obvious contrast between two parts of the human person. In every text investigated, the *psuché* is used of the whole person, not one of many parts. In many of the texts, the soul's loss is inextricably linked to the death of the body. In the most immediate context – Matthew 10:28b – both body and soul are destroyed together at the final punishment of the wicked. Thus, 10:28a could not be implying the innate immortality of the soul. Also, the only significant thing this text implies about the intermediate state is that it is just that – intermediate. It does not imply consciousness. It is a state of death, albeit a temporary death.

What Matthew 10:28a Does Imply

Conditionalists are not prepared to concede that body and soul are two distinct parts of a human, nor that the soul is by nature immortal. But that does not mean that conditionalists refuse to take Matthew 10:28a seriously. We believe that freed from the shackles of platonic dualism this text is better able to convey the original intentions of both Christ and Matthew. They encourage believers to be more concerned about doing God's will than cautious about how others might respond to their devotion. They also remind us that although death is real, it is not permanent. Between Matthew 28a and 28b there is space and time for the dead to be raised by God's power at Christ's return. For believers, this is cause for celebration.

References

George Christian Knapp, *Lecture on Christian Theology* (New York: G. & C. & H. Carvill, 1833), 588. [↔]

Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1991), 153. [↔]

David Burge, "On Matthew 10:28" in *From Death To Life*, Issue 29, Jan/Mar 2006, p.3 [↔]

I am referring, of course, to the Septuagint – the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. [↔]

Matthew 6:33 [↔]

Matthew 10:6 [↔]

Matthew 10:35-36 [↔]

Matthew 10:34 [↔]

Matthew 10:38 [↔]

Source: [Afterlife](#)