THE QUESTION

What is the soul, and how is it different from the spirit?

Asked by a THF member on July 28, 2026 · published November 9, 2026 · 11 numbered quotations · the 18 early Christian passages and 45 Bible verses we kept are listed at the back, each with a link.

Read it online: thehistoricfaith.com/early-church-questions/what-is-the-soul-and-how-is-it-different-from-the-spirit

The short answer *Interpretation: our reading of the passages, not their words*

The early writers taught that the soul is the life God breathed into man, which lasts because God wills it. Most treat the soul as the human breath of life and the Spirit as God's gift that makes a person spiritual. The soul gives life to the whole body and holds our free choice.

LIBRARY ONLY	This study was written only from The Historic Faith's library of early-Christian writings and the Bible, never from the web. Every passage we kept from what the library gave is listed at the back, with a link to read it.
HOW IT WAS MADE	Compiled by machine learning from The Historic Faith's library of early-Christian writings and the Bible only. Every quotation was matched word for word against our stored text. Not yet reviewed by The Historic Faith.
SHARING WITH AN AI?	Every quotation here comes from The Historic Faith's library. If you paste this study into an AI, anything it adds beyond these pages comes from that AI, not from us.

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POINT 1 OF 8

The soul comes from the breath of God

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Tertullian sums up his teaching in one long definition. The soul comes from God's breath, not from matter. It is lasting, thinking, and free to choose. Irenaeus adds that the soul is not life itself but shares in a life God gives.

1

> “Then we define the soul as sprung from the breath of God, immortal, having a body, having form, simple in its substance, intelligent by its own nature, expressing its power in various ways, free in its decisions, subject to accidental changes, changeable in its faculties, rational, supreme, endowed with an instinct of presentiment, and developed out of one original soul.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tertullian,** *De Anima (On the Soul)* 22 (c. 196–220 AD) **Source 7, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

2

> “Similarly, the soul is not life itself, but it participates in the life given to it by God.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Irenaeus,** *Against Heresies: Book II* (c. 175–202 AD) **Source 3, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 2 OF 8

Man became a living soul by God's gift

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Irenaeus reads the words about the first man becoming a living soul. He says the soul came alive by sharing in life, and souls go on existing because God wills it. Their lasting life depends on God, not on the soul itself.

3

> “Therefore, the prophetic word tells us about the first-formed man, "He became a living soul," teaching us that the soul became alive through participation in life.”
>
> *later in the same passage*
>
> “Therefore, when God gives life and endless duration, it happens that souls which did not exist before will endure forever, because God has willed them to exist and continue existing.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Irenaeus,** *Against Heresies: Book II* (c. 175–202 AD) **Source 3, page 6** Read it in the library ›
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POINT 3 OF 8

The breath of life is not the Spirit

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Irenaeus draws a clear line. The breath of life makes a person a living being, and all people have it. The life-giving Spirit is God's own, given to those who turn from earthly desires, and it makes a person spiritual.

4

"The breath of life, which made man a living being, is one thing, and the life-giving Spirit is another, which made him spiritual."

later in the same passage

"He shows that breath is indeed given to all people on earth, but the Spirit belongs only to those who overcome earthly desires."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Irenaeus,** *Against Heresies: Book V* (c. 175–202 AD) **Source 2, page 6** Read it in the library ›

THF's updated English

POINT 4 OF 8

The soul is called spirit because it breathes

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Tertullian explains that the soul is sometimes called spirit only in a lower sense, because it breathes. He insists the soul is breath from God, not the Holy Spirit in the special sense Scripture uses.

5

"We call it this because it breathes, and not because it is spirit in some special sense."

later in the same passage

"For this reason, we on our side maintain, even from that passage, that the soul is breath and not the Spirit, in the scriptural and distinctive sense of Spirit."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tertullian,** *De Anima (On the Soul)* 11 (c. 196–220 AD) **Source 4, page 6** Read it in the library ›

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POINT 5 OF 8

The soul should be united with the Spirit

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Tatian says the soul binds the flesh together and the flesh holds the soul. He urges us to seek again what was lost: a soul joined to the Holy Spirit. Then the person becomes a dwelling where God lives by the Spirit.

6

"But further, it now becomes us to seek what we once had but have lost, to unite the soul with the Holy Spirit, and to strive after union with God."

later in the same passage

"The bond of the flesh is the soul. That which encloses the soul is the flesh."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tatian,** *Address to the Greeks* 15 (c. 150–180 AD) **Source 1, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 6 OF 8

The soul gives life to the whole body

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Gregory argues the soul does not sit beside one part of the body, or the whole body would not be alive. It adds no weight but gives life, so he calls it bodiless. Lactantius admits no one knows for sure where the mind is seated.

7

"But the soul, existing in the body, does not add weight. Rather, it gives life. Therefore, the soul cannot be a body, but is incorporeal."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Gregory Thaumaturgus,** *On the Subject of the Soul* 1 (c. 240–270 AD) **Source 11, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

8

"For it is not known where the mind is located, or what kind of thing it is."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Lactantius,** *On the Workmanship of God* 16 (c. 290–320 AD) **Source 16, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

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POINT 7 OF 8

Free choice belongs to the soul

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Tertullian counts free will among the soul's natural powers. Chrysostom says the soul stands between vice and virtue and rules the passions. By choosing rightly, with the Spirit's help, it can make even the body spiritual.

9 "We have assigned to the soul the freedom of the will that we just mentioned, its rule over the works of nature, and its occasional gift of divination, apart from that gift of prophecy which comes to it especially from the grace of God."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tertullian,** *De Anima (On the Soul)* 22 (c. 196–220 AD) **Source 7, page 7** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

10 "The rule over the passions belongs to the soul and concerns it. The soul is placed between vice and virtue. If it uses the body rightly, it makes the body spiritual."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **John Chrysostom,** *Commentary on Galatians* 5 (c. 386–407 AD) **Source 18, page 7** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

POINT 8 OF 8

Some linked the soul with the blood

Our note · compiled by machine learning · Interpretation: our reading of the passages, not their words

Origen reports that some people taught a second, lower soul that lives in the blood, based on the saying that the life of all flesh is its blood. He sets this out as their opinion to examine, not as settled church teaching.

11 "They argue that because the spreading of the blood throughout all the flesh produces life in the flesh, this soul, which is said to be the life of all flesh, is contained in the blood."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Origen,** *De Principiis (On First Principles)* 4 (c. 215–254 AD) **Source 9, page 7** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

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THE LIMITS

What these passages don’t tell us

- The writers do not fully agree: Tertullian says the soul has a body and is simple, while Gregory calls it bodiless and Tatian calls it composite.
- None of these passages settles exactly where in the body the soul is seated.
- The passage shown from Origen reports the blood idea as the view of some, without giving his own verdict.
- A word-for-word match shows that a quotation really is in our text. It does not show that our reading of it is right, or who wrote each work.

WHERE EVERY QUOTE CAME FROM

The Sources

The 18 early Christian passages and 45 Bible verses we kept for this question (repeats and weak or off-topic search hits were left out): early Christian passages first (sources 1–18, grouped by writer, earliest first), then Bible verses in The Faith Once Delivered Bible (sources 19–40, in Bible order), then 23 more verses THF links to these passages, by reference. **Quote 1, page 2** beside a source shows where the study quotes it. Passages are in THF’s updated English unless marked “1885 English” (the Roberts–Donaldson translation, public domain). “… [continues online]” marks a passage the library gave only in part. **On paper?** At **thehistoricfaith.com**, Bible verses are in the **Audio Bible** and early Christian writings in the **Library** (search for the title).

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITERS *18 passages from 8 writers*

Tatian, *c. 150–180 AD · source 1*

1 *Address to the Greeks* 15 **Quote 6, page 4** “human soul consists of many parts and is not simple… [continues online] **read ›**

Irenaeus, *c. 175–202 AD · sources 2–3*

2 *Against Heresies: Book V* (1885 English) **Quote 4, page 3** also “the first Adam was made” by the Lord “a living soul, the second Adam a quickening spirit… [continues online] **read ›**

3 *Against Heresies: Book II* (1885 English) **Quotes 2, 3, page 2** “far, then, let me speak concerning the creation and the continued duration of the soul… [continues online] **read ›**

Tertullian, *c. 196–220 AD · sources 4–8*

4 *De Anima (On the Soul)* 11 (1885 English) **Quote 5, page 3** “the nature of my present inquiry obliges me to call the soul spirit or breath, because to breathe is ascribed to another substance… [continues online] **read ›**

5 *De Anima (On the Soul)* 10 (on point 4) “a firm faith, it is necessary to declare with Plato that the soul is simple. In other words, it is uniform and not made of parts. That is to say… [continues online] **read ›**

6 *De Anima (On the Soul)* 18 “powers, as Plato handed it down to the heretics. He treats these as distinct from our bodily functions, as if we had knowledge of them before death. In the Phaedo… [continues online] **read ›**

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7 *De Anima (On the Soul)* 22 (1885 English) **Quotes 1, 9, pages 2, 5** “soul, then, we define to be sprung from the breath of God, immortal, possessing body, having form, simple in its substance, intelligent in its own nature, developing its power in… [continues online] **read ›**

8 *De Anima (On the Soul)* 45 (1885 English) “does it expel mental function — it withdraws it for a time… [continues online] **read ›**

Origen, *c. 215–254 AD · sources 9–10*

9 *De Principiis (On First Principles)* 4 (1885 English) **Quote 11, page 5** “from the circumstance that it is the diffusion of the blood throughout the whole flesh which produces life in the flesh, they assert that this soul, which is said to… [continues online] **read ›**

10 *De Principiis (On First Principles)* 3 (1885 English) “is then clearly established, by many proofs, that while the soul of man exists in this body, it may admit different energies, i.e., operations, from a diversity of good… [continues online] **read ›**

Gregory Thaumaturgus, *c. 240–270 AD · sources 11–13*

11 *On the Subject of the Soul* 1 (1885 English) **Quote 7, page 4** “ought now, therefore, to ascertain in what manner it is in the body… [continues online] **read ›**

12 *On the Subject of the Soul* 1 (1885 English) “these are the questions which are wont, above all, to be discussed, in any inquiry about the soul, as most important, and as best calculated to mark out its distinctive… [continues online] **read ›**

13 *On the Subject of the Soul* 1 (1885 English) “of all, then, I shall propose to inquire by what criterion the soul can, according to its nature, be apprehended… [continues online] **read ›**

Arnobius, *c. 290–330 AD · sources 14–15*

14 *Against the Heathen* 1 (1885 English) “the perceptions are; what the soul, and whether it flew to us of its own accord, or whether it was generated and brought into existence with our bodies themselves… [continues online] **read ›**

15 *Against the Heathen* 2 (1885 English) “because all our souls have one origin, we therefore think exactly alike… [continues online] **read ›**

Lactantius, *c. 290–320 AD · sources 16–17*

16 *On the Workmanship of God* 16 **Quote 8, page 4** where the mind is located, or what kind of thing it is. Therefore, philosophers have discussed many different ideas about its nature and its location. But I will not hide… [continues online] **read ›**

17 *On the Workmanship of God* 18 (1885 English; on point 6) “follows another, and in itself an inexplicable inquiry: Whether the soul and the mind are the same, or there be one faculty by which we live, and another by which… [continues online] **read ›**

John Chrysostom, *c. 386–407 AD · source 18*

18 *Commentary on Galatians* 5 (1885 English) **Quote 10, page 5** “the soul, however, superfluous? The flesh and the Spirit are mentioned, but where is the soul… [continues online] **read ›**

THE BIBLE *22 verses, The Faith Once Delivered Bible (Old Testament from the Septuagint), in Bible order*

19 **Genesis 2:7** Then God formed the man of dust from the earth, and breathed into his face the breath of life, and the man became a living soul. **read ›**

20 **Leviticus 17:11** For the life of all flesh is its blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for its blood shall make atonement in place of the soul. **read ›**

21 **Job 8:14** For his house shall be without inhabitants, and his tent shall turn out to be a spider’s web. **read ›**

22 **Job 32:8** But there is a spirit in mortals, and the breath of the Almighty is what teaches. **read ›**

23 **Psalms 42:2** My soul has thirsted for the living God; when shall I come and appear before the face of God? (Septuagint Psalm 41:3 (Psalm 42:2 in most Bibles)) **read ›**

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24 **Psalms 119:25** My soul has clung to the ground; give me life according to your word. (Septuagint Psalm 118:25 (Psalm 119:25 in most Bibles)) **read ›**

25 **Proverbs 20:27** The breath of men is a light of the Lord, who searches the inner chambers of the belly. **read ›**

26 **Ecclesiastes 3:21** And who has seen the spirit of the sons of man, whether it goes upward, and the spirit of the beast, whether it goes down to the earth? **read ›**

27 **Isaiah 14:6** Having struck a nation in wrath with an incurable blow, striking a nation with a blow of wrath which did not spare, he rested in confidence. **read ›**

28 **Isaiah 15:4** For Heshbon and Elealeh have cried out; their voice was heard as far as Jahaz. Therefore the loins of the land of Moab cry aloud; her soul will know. **read ›**

29 **Isaiah 26:9** that our soul desires. In the night my spirit rises early to you, O God, for your statutes are a light on the earth; learn righteousness, you who dwell on the earth. **read ›**

30 **Isaiah 42:5** Thus says the Lord God, who made heaven and fixed it, who established the earth and the things in it, and gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk on it: **read ›**

31 **Jeremiah 41:3** and all the Jews who were with him in Mizpah, and all the Chaldeans who were found there. (Septuagint Jeremiah 48:3 (Jeremiah 41:3 in most Bibles)) **read ›**

32 **Amos 9:15** And I will plant them upon their land, and they shall never again be plucked up from the land which I have given them, says the Lord God Almighty. **read ›**

33 **1 Enoch 49:3** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

34 **1 Enoch 59:2** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

35 **1 Enoch 93:12** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

36 **Mark 8:37** Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? **read ›**

37 **John 6:63** It is the Spirit who gives life. The flesh profits nothing. The words I speak to you are spirit and life. **read ›**

38 **Acts 26:9** I myself therefore thought that I ought to do many things against the name of Jesus of Nazareth. **read ›**

39 **1 Corinthians 2:11** For who among men knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? So also no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. **read ›**

40 **1 Corinthians 15:45** So also it is written: The first man Adam became a living soul. The last Adam became a life-giving spirit. **read ›**

ALSO LINKED BY THF TO THESE PASSAGES *23 verses, by reference*

Partly machine-linked: related to the passages, not always quoted in them. Each reference links to the verse in our audio Bible.

Genesis 2:21

1 Samuel 10:11

Ezekiel 1:10

Matthew 11:19 · 12:43 · 25:32 · 25:41

Luke 6:29 · 10:18

John 17:24 · 19:2

Acts 3:6

Romans 7:23 · 11:32 · 11:33

1 Corinthians 1:26 · 2:14 · 15:46

Galatians 4:24 · 5:17 · 5:19

Colossians 1:16 · 2:11

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Searched: Ante-Nicene Fathers volumes 1–9 and the Bible, including the Septuagint.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

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THE END OF THIS STUDY