



james bryan smith

The Good and Beautiful
YOU

DISCOVERING THE PERSON
JESUS CREATED YOU TO BE



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one

you have a soul



Many years ago my mentor and friend, Richard J. Foster, and I had lunch. Not long into the lunch, Richard's face looked very serious, and he said, "I want you to hear this word, and take it to heart. Your career is going to change. You are going to move from the minor league to the major league in the next few years. *You must take care of your soul.*"

I said, "Well, I have no idea what that means, but . . . thanks for the advice."

"No, I am serious, Jim. You need to write this down and remember it."

So I wrote it down. I assumed Richard was just being nice; I never expected he might be right. I kept the napkin I wrote it on, but I did not heed his advice.

Richard was right. The next few years of my life, in terms of my career, changed. I went from being a college professor and part-time teaching pastor in a local church, to the head of a ministry with a growing number of staff. We were blessed with financial resources beyond our expectations, and we did our best to increase our impact



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for the kingdom of God. New opportunities came, and doors were opened that I had never dreamed of. I was traveling around the world, and it seemed clear that God was doing a lot of good through our work. I found myself feeling two things at once: excitement to do the work and enormous pressure to succeed.

I did what many people do: I poured my heart into it and worked harder than ever before. I read books on how to be a leader, studied ministry programs, learned about marketing and branding, and honed every skill I had in order to advance our work. Success kept coming, in terms of how success is measured in ministry work: more people were being reached and more influence was being exerted and more resources were being given. But I was enjoying it less and less.

I did not have a moral failure, I was not experiencing burnout, nor was I suffering under an addiction, though I suspect I had not sought help I could have. There was a lot of grief and unhealed trauma that I had suppressed. As a result, I simply lost joy and was suffering in silence. I made the common mistake of thinking that doing work for God was more important than caring for my own soul. And now I was paying the price, because my soul refused to be neglected. I had pursued and achieved success—but at what cost?

I confided my concerns with my longtime pastor and friend, Jeff, who said, “Maybe you need to talk to someone, a trusted counselor.” I had never done any kind of therapy work, but I was desperate enough to try. God led me to a therapist in Colorado, and I set aside a week to go for some intensive counseling. I did not want to admit it, but I knew that I needed help. The only thing in my favor was a small amount of courage to ask for it. I knew that I would soon be going into the office of a therapist, and for the next week baring my soul.

“So,” my therapist, Michael, asked, “What brings you here?”

“I cannot go on living this way,” I said.

“Say more,” he inquired.

“I feel empty inside. I have lost my joy, my smile. I just feel nothing,” I said.

He invited me to share anything and everything I was comfortable sharing. I thought to myself, *Well, I am here, and it is safe, so I might as well let it all hang out.* I shared all of my biggest mistakes and regrets; I exposed all the skeletons in my closet; I confessed my worst sins and darkest fears, and the thoughts, words, and deeds of which I was most ashamed. This took around thirty minutes but felt like an eternity.

Michael sat in silence and listened, then said nothing for a minute. Then he said, “I am so impressed with your integrity. You are such a man of integrity.”

“Wait, what? Did you not hear a thing I just said? I confessed my worst failures, most shameful sins, my darkest secrets, and your first response is that you are impressed with my *integrity*?”

“Yes, and it was such a joy and honor to hear it, not because you are *James Bryan Smith*, the author, but because you are Jim Smith, the wonderful human soul. In that confession, you were truly in alignment with God. The integrity I see in you is *not* because you named your struggle; the integrity is in your soul. You opened up your soul, the place no one can see, the place where there is pain and fear and shame, but there is also so much more that you do not see.”

I was stunned.

“Jim,” Michael said, looking right at me, “God sees into your soul—into the totality of who you are. Jesus looks at our worst and puts his arm around us and says, ‘Well, *of course.*’ Jesus knows the truth of where we are, and he does not condemn us for it. But he does have great expectancy for how much we can heal, for how free and alive we can be. It was an honor to see the core of your being. Right now, you only see the junk . . . I see the gold—I *see Christ in you.* Your soul is longing to be made well, and you have taken the first step toward that by coming here.”

By the end of the week I felt like a new person. A burden had been lifted. On the last day, as I was leaving, I noticed for the first time that the name of the counseling program is Restoring the Soul. I suddenly thought of Richard, and what he had said many years earlier. I would learn that week and for the next few years that it was my soul, the thing years earlier Richard had asked me to guard, that was both the cause of my pain and the hope of my healing. I had, in fact, *not* guarded my soul. But now I would, and I resolved to try my best never to make that mistake again.

OUR SOULS WANT LIFE

Not long after my own time in therapy, I was listening to a podcast in which the guest spoke about his time in counseling. The guest was one of my favorite spiritual writers, whose books have been helpful to me. I was surprised to learn that he had struggled for years with clinical depression. He said he felt ashamed of his depression, feeling as if he had to keep it secret, and keeping the secret was exhausting. He assumed that the spiritual life was like an ascent to a high mountain where you try to touch God, but that spirituality had nothing to do with the valley and he had been living in the valley.

He said during his depression he never felt “less spiritual,” but that the things he relied on in his life for meaning and purpose, such as his intellect and his emotional life, were gone; his willpower had been shattered. And yet, “there was this primitive core of being, this life force that was alive and holding out hope.” He said it was his soul. He said, “The soul is this wild creature that knows how to survive where our intellect and our feelings and our will cannot.” Then he said this: “Catching a glimpse of my soul kept me alive, realizing I was *more than* my mind and my will, because when those things are gone, the soul is still available.”

I have come to believe that our soul is the most essential, precious thing about any of us. And, paradoxically, our soul is something we are the least aware of, the least concerned about, until our lives begin

to fall apart. I have come to believe that our souls help to save us—not in and by themselves, but because their needs can drive us to God who alone can save us, and to the things only God can provide.

But I also believe that for many people the soul is neglected. The key to our happiness, our well-being, our joy, our sense of meaning and purpose, is our embodied soul. But the last thing we suspect when we struggle is that the problem is in our soul. This is because we have been trained to think of ourselves not as having a *soul*, but as being a *self*.

The world in which we live is constantly bombarding us with messages that we, and everyone around us, is a self, and it is the leading cause of our lack of well-being, our strife in our relationships, and for many, it is the root of our self-hatred. Fortunately our soul, like the author said on the podcast, “is a wild creature that knows how to survive.” My hope for this book is that your soul will be able to stop trying to survive and will learn how to *thrive*.

How would you describe the difference between having a soul and being a self?

FALSE NARRATIVE: YOU ARE A SELF

When it comes to forming our sense of identity, we begin not with our spiritual dimension but with our bodily dimension. And we begin not with our sense of connection, but of isolation. “I am a self” is the dominant identity narrative. The twentieth century has been called “the century of the self.” The self, not the soul, emerged as the central defining term of who we are, and the result has not been positive.

A few years ago, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* cited a study that indicated that in the last one hundred years “the people who lived in each generation were three times more likely to experience depression than folks in the generation before them.” All this, despite the rise of the mental health profession. James Hillman, renowned

psychologist, gave this provocative title to his 1993 book: *We've Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy—And the World's Getting Worse*.

This is in no way a denigration of psychotherapy and counseling. I have benefited greatly from therapy, and I encourage everyone I know to receive counseling. Despite the fact that the word *psychology* literally means “the study of the soul” (the Greek word for the soul is *psychos*), the soul, or spiritual dimension, of the human person has largely been removed in much of modern psychology. However, therapists and psychologists who operate from a Christian worldview include the soul as an important part of counseling and therapy. Without the soul, the human person is reduced to a *self*. The dominant narrative in our world today is that we are selves, not embodied souls.

The self is a construct that is built on the narrative that says you are an accidental, carbon-based life form that is here today and gone tomorrow. The self is an isolated individual. As such, the self is primarily interested in survival and finds its value in how it looks, what it possesses, and what others say about it. The self thrives on the currencies of money, sex, and power, on résumés, branding, accomplishments, notoriety, physical appearance, and entertainment. The self is built on *self*-reliance: “Look out for yourself,” “Take care of yourself.” In this sense, the self becomes an idol—everything revolves around the self.

The self can be easily misled into trusting in non-reality. Misled into thinking beauty, goodness, and truth are subjective and that money, fame, or success will make us happy. The self is taught to believe that perception is reality, and that what matters is what people think about us. The self consists of the accumulated ideas and images it has of itself, and the ideas and images it wants to project to others in order to find acceptance and affirmation. In short, *the self is too small to bear the weight of who we really are*. Only the soul can do that, because our souls are real, eternal, and massive. And our souls have built into them the way to wellness. We just have to listen to them.

TRUE NARRATIVE: YOU HAVE A SOUL

When we focus on our self, our sacred soul is neglected. Our soul has a completely different value system. It knows what really matters and what does not. Our soul cares for vastly different things than what our self cares for. Our soul cares about harmony, connection, and integration. Our soul is all about integrity—about what is real, true, beautiful, and good. Our soul wants to be desired for itself, longs to be loved without condition, and yearns for connection with deeper realities—spiritual realities. Our soul hungers for God (Psalm 42:1). The soul knows there is a God—and longs to live in surrender to God.

What is your soul? Your embodied soul is your *founding life form*. The Latin word for soul is *animus*, where the word “animate” comes from. Your soul animates your life; your soul gives life to your body. Your soul is the wellspring of your spiritual emergence from birth to death. Your soul is a non-physical substance, but it is very real.

God breathed your soul into you. “And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living *soul*” (Genesis 2:7 KJV, emphasis added). Your soul is a gift. It can be neglected to your peril, or it can be nurtured and nourished to your salvation. Your soul can be saved, but it can also be lost: “For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Matthew 16:26 KJV). As John Ortberg points out, “[Your soul] weighs nothing but means everything.” And yet our soul is something we seldom think about.

Rarely do we find good teaching about our souls, not even in our churches. Ironically, I find more “soul talk” going on *outside* of the church. Taylor Momsen, a child star and television actress, had some friends die from suicide and accidents, and she suffered from depression and substance abuse. She said she turned to music to heal her. She said, “I had given up on life, but then I turned to music. Rock and roll is food for the soul.” How can rock music be “food for the soul”? I suspect she felt something deeply in music,

and *soul* is the only word she could find to speak about this kind of depth.

We are more likely to hear the word *soul* in terms of music (e.g., soul music) than we do in our churches. These popular songs all contain the word *soul* in their titles:

- “Heart and Soul” by Huey Lewis & the News
- “All That You Have Is Your Soul” by Tracy Chapman
- “Satisfy My Soul” by Bob Marley & The Wailers
- “Soul Man” by Sam & Dave
- “Show Me Your Soul” by Red Hot Chili Peppers
- “Soul Survivor” by the Rolling Stones
- “Who Will Save Your Soul” by Jewel
- “Beautiful Soul” by Jesse McCartney

Soul is a word we see all over culture—though without much spiritual meaning. There is soul food, soul friendship, soul brothers and soul sisters, and soulmates. This is because we know, instinctively, that there is something deeper than we can name. The word *soul* is often used but seldom understood.

Do you agree the word *soul* is often used but seldom understood? How often do you hear teaching on the soul or conversation around things of the soul?

Your soul is the most real part of you. As Ruth Haley Barton writes, your embodied soul “is the ‘you’ that exists beyond any role that you play, any job that you perform, any relationship that seems to define you, or any notoriety or success you may have achieved. It is the

part of you that longs for more of God than you have right now.” Our souls seek harmony, want to share deeply with one another, and yearn to be free from practices that harm; and our souls long for integrity—to show on the outside who they are on the inside.

WHERE DOES YOUR SOUL COME FROM?

Your soul was created by God and breathed into your body (Genesis 2:7). It was made by God: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you” (Jeremiah 1:5). You were intended before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4). Your soul is the essence of who you most deeply are. The Trinity is the Creator of your embodied soul, created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27). It is the bridge between your essence in God and your existence in the world. Your soul is your deepest nobility, what makes you sacred and precious and valuable.

The soul can be difficult to define. The great theologian Karl Barth confessed, “We shall search the Old and New Testaments in vain for a theory of the relation between the soul and body.” Your soul is a mystery—a beautiful, powerful, wonderful, mysterious part of you. It cannot be weighed on a scale. But your soul is constantly at work in your life. Theologian Ray Anderson said, “The soul is the ‘whole person’ existing in a bodily form and state.” Anderson says it well: the soul exists in a bodily form. Christianity does not teach *dualism*—the notion that our souls and bodies are separate. This was the teaching of the Greek philosophers, and it has found its way into the minds of many Christians. We are, and always will be, ensouled bodies, or embodied souls.

Your embodied soul is a gift from God that requires care. Your soul needs, actually demands, care. This was my own experience, and I found out the hard way. When I finally had the courage to face my lack of joy, my own loss of purpose and meaning, I assumed it was because I had not been more diligent in my Christian life. I have come to believe that many emotions, such as a lack of joy, are like indicator lights in our car that tell us when something is wrong. The problem for me was a downcast soul:

Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me? (Psalm 43:5)

How do our souls become cast down? When their needs are not met or when they endure a hardship. Our souls, though powerful and eternal, are actually very needy. And this can be a good thing. Our souls refuse to be neglected, and if we listen to their needs we will tend to them. And like the psalmist we will discover that the needs of our souls are met only in God:

Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God. (Psalm 43:5)

TEN THINGS YOUR SOUL CAN'T ENDURE

Our souls are powerful and eternal, but there are a lot of things they cannot endure. In fact, there are at least ten things the soul cannot endure:

1. Harm to our bodies
2. Feeling unwanted
3. Guilt
4. Shame
5. Disconnection from God
6. Boredom
7. Sin
8. Being victimized
9. Meaninglessness
10. Nonexistence

Let me unpack these things.

Our souls are one with our bodies, and when our bodies are harmed or mistreated, our souls hurt as well. Both pleasure and pain—originating in our bodies—are felt in our souls. When someone hurts our bodies (abuse), our souls are fractured—and if it's severe, they are broken (though not beyond healing).

Our souls cannot endure feeling unwanted and unwelcome. Have you ever walked into a social setting and sensed that you were not welcome, that people did not want you to be there? That pain you felt

is a soul pain. After all, your soul was created to be lovingly accepted by God and others.

Our souls also cannot endure guilt and shame. Shame is different from guilt. We feel shame for who we are, but we feel guilt for what we have done. Guilt can be a good thing—if we have done something wrong, we should feel bad about it and want to repent and correct it. Our souls are what want to find forgiveness and make amends.

Our souls cannot stand deadness and boredom. This is not simply enduring standing in a long line at the DMV or being on hold on the phone with music looping while we wait for the customer representative. The deadness and boredom I am talking about comes from the lack of being a part of something exciting, meaningful, purposeful, and adventurous. Our souls long for this, and if we cannot get it we will settle for an amusement park or marathon-watching TV. But our souls are spiritual in nature, and find the secular to be dull. The soul is made to soar in transcendence.

Our souls also cannot endure sin. Sin always hurts us. Some sin may be pleasurable for a time (otherwise no one would sin) but our souls know what sin is—namely, that which destroys us. God is not against sin because God is prudish; God is against sin because it hurts us. So he designed our souls to recoil at it—sooner or later.

Our souls also hate being victimized. If someone has harmed us, that pain can become a part of our story. Our souls want to walk into our story and own it, not be controlled by it.

Finally, our souls also hate meaninglessness and nonexistence. They cannot stand spending energy on things that do not matter, on living a life that doesn't mean anything. And our embodied souls cannot endure the notion of dying and no longer existing. The fear of

Journal about a time when you experienced one of these ten things that the soul cannot endure.

How do you think this affected your soul?

death, not just of our own but of those whom we love, is a deep fear in our souls.

TEN THINGS YOUR SOUL NEEDS

You have a mind that is phenomenal. It can think and reason and calculate; it can imagine and dream and envision. You have a body that is amazing. It is made of over thirty trillion cells, all working miraculously, without much help from you. Your heart and lungs and liver are all doing their thing right now, even as you read. You have a will, a power to decide and to act and plan and execute and accomplish. Your soul is interacting with all of these dimensions of who you are.

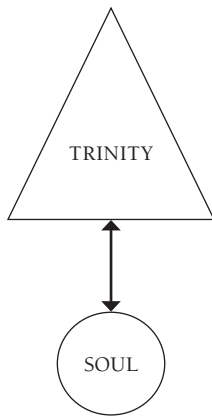


Figure 1.1. The Trinity fulfills the desires of the soul

But your soul is more than an operating system; it came factory loaded with a lot of needs. Your embodied soul is durable and tough, but very needy. Your soul was intricately designed with several needs; there is no debating them or escaping them—they simply must be met. God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, created your soul with each of these relational needs that only the Trinity can fulfill. And because God is good, all that we need God has provided as free gifts. Fulfilling these desires is an act of grace.

There are at least ten God-created longings of the soul:

1. To see my body as sacred
2. To be wanted, desired
3. To be loved without condition
4. To be intimately connected to God
5. To be forgiven forever
6. To be alive and empowered to adventure
7. To be holy, virtuous
8. To own my story

9. To be called to a life of purpose
10. To be glorified and live forever

First, our souls, which are embodied, long for our body to be regarded as sacred. Harm to our bodies is harmful to our souls, because they are united.

Second, our souls long to be wanted. When you feel welcome, when you feel as if other people really desire you and are glad you are there, your soul feels joy and peace.

Third, our souls also want to be loved, not for anything we do, but for who we are. We all know when people are showing affection or appreciation for what we have done. The soul's longing to be loved is to be loved for absolutely no reason.

Fourth, our souls long for God. And we connect to God, to the spiritual realm, in so many ways, not just in church. A piece of art, a wildflower, a calming or exhilarating song, connect to our souls.

Fifth, our souls long for forgiveness. Just as our souls cannot endure being unforgiven, our souls rejoice when we have found real forgiveness. When the wrong we have done has been acquitted, our souls find release.

Sixth, our souls also long to be fully alive. They long for an adventure. Our souls want to be a part of something thrilling.

Seventh, just as our souls reject sin, they also long for holiness. Our souls have been preprogrammed for purity. They long to be clean. When I walk in holiness—when I do the next thing I know to be right—my soul feels whole. I am living into who I was designed to be.

Eighth, our souls come into this world in a time, a place, a family, and a culture. Our lives become our story. And our souls long for our story to have meaning. We want our lives—with their pains and losses, as well as joys and successes—to matter.

Ninth, our souls also long to live a life that makes the world a better place. For most of us, we long to feel like we are called to something, to be a part of something. We are born with a set of gifts, with a

specific temperament, and certain talents and passions that come together to form our unique calling.

Tenth and finally, we long for glory. Not merely the fame and glory that come in this life, but to be glorified in the next. Our souls long

To what extent have you experienced any of these ten longings of the soul?

for eternal life. Every one of these longings has been met in God and by God. There is nothing we have to do to earn that fulfillment—they are all a gift.

CHRIST IS THE WAY TO WELLNESS OF SOUL

Our souls, while eternal and enduring, cannot endure deadness and boredom, rejection and sin. And our souls are very, very needy. In fact, the needs of our souls are far greater than what this world can give. As John Ortberg writes, “The soul’s infinite capacity to desire is the mirror image of God’s infinite capacity to give. . . . The unlimited need of the soul matches the unlimited grace of God.” The good news is that the God who created our needy souls has, by grace, provided all that our souls will ever need. We cannot achieve or attain these things our souls need. They have to be given to us by God, as a gift. And God has provided all of those things in Jesus.

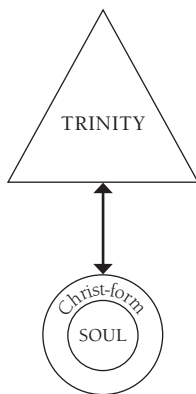


Figure 1.2. When we come into faith in Christ, the Christ-form surrounds our soul

1. In Christ I am a sacred member of Jesus’ body.
2. In Christ I am wanted.
3. In Christ I am loved.
4. In Christ I am connected to God.
5. In Christ I am forgiven.
6. In Christ I am alive and empowered to adventure.
7. In Christ I am holy.
8. In Christ I am the owner of my story.
9. In Christ I am called.
10. In Christ I am hidden and glorified.

If we seek true and complete fulfillment from the things of this world we will search in vain. People may want us, or they may not.

The soul cannot endure . . .	The longings of the soul . . .	In Christ . . .
Harm to our bodies	To see my body as sacred	I am a sacred member of Jesus’ body.
Feeling unwanted	To be wanted and desired	I am wanted.
Shame	To be loved without condition	I am loved.
Disconnection with God	To be intimately connected with God	I am connected to God.
Guilt	To be forgiven forever	I am forgiven.
Boredom	To be made alive and to take part in an adventure	I am alive and empowered to adventure.
Sin	To be holy and virtuous	I am holy.
Victimization	To own my story	I am the owner of my story.
Meaninglessness	To be called to a life of purpose	I am called.
Nonexistence	To be glorified and live forever	I am hidden and glorified.

Figure 1.3. The wellness of the soul

People may love us, or they may not. To fulfill the deep needs of our soul, we must look to Jesus. When we come into faith in Christ, when we are born from above and enter into the kingdom of God, our lives become “hidden with Christ” (Colossians 3:3). In this sense, the “Christ-form” surrounds our soul, as seen in figure 1.2. In Christ alone we find what our souls are looking for. In Jesus alone we find wellness for our souls.

In Christ I discover that I am desired. In Christ I learn that I am loved. By the work of Jesus on the cross, I find that I am forgiven forever. And through Jesus’ resurrection, I realize that I am risen with him. By the work of Jesus I have been made holy; by his victory over sin and death, I discover that I am free. In Christ I learn that I have been gifted and called.

“All I have needed thy hand hath provided,” as the hymn says. God’s amazing grace has saved a wretch like me. “My sin—oh, the bliss of this glorious thought! / My sin—not in part but the whole / Is nailed to His cross and I bear it no more; / Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, oh my soul.”

The rest of this book will examine how God, in Christ, has created the good and beautiful you and has provided for the deepest needs of your soul. Each chapter will examine these actions of God on your behalf and my behalf.

IT IS WELL WITH MY SOUL

The week of intensive counseling was the beginning of my soul restoration. During that week I stopped and acknowledged that I *had* a soul, something I had forgotten and neglected. Indeed, I am a soul, and to neglect my soul is to neglect my entire person. But that week was only the beginning of the work I needed to do to develop wellness in my soul. The primary change in me was learning to live again with my soul in mind in all that I do. I was able to see that success is something to be thankful for but not to rely on, and in fact is something to be careful about. We simply must guard our souls.

Over the next few years I would relearn to love the things my soul loves: loving God, first and foremost; loving that I am desired and loved by God; loving being made alive in Christ; loving being forgiven forever by the cross and living with no condemnation; loving the unique calling God has given me; and loving the reality that I, and those I love, will one day rule and reign and dance and sing in the new heaven and the new earth. And in the meantime, taking successes lightly.

A few years after my own healing journey, I had dinner with Richard Foster. I shared with him my own story of soul restoration. “Way back when, you told me my life would change, and that I must guard my soul. How did you know this would happen?” I asked.

“Because it happened to me. That is why I tried to warn you.”

“Well,” I said, “I wish I would have listened.”

“You listened as best you could,” Richard said. “There are many things we just have to go through on our own to fully understand.”

One of the odd things people who have done counseling, or been through therapy, or through twelve-step programs, will often say is, “I am actually grateful for my struggle.” One friend of mine even said, “My addiction saved my life.” I used to think that was crazy. Now I know it is absolutely true.

I am sad for the few years I struggled as my soul atrophied, but I am not sad that I struggled. It led me to a new kind of love and freedom and passion I could never have experienced if I had not struggled. I am so grateful to be able to say, “It is well with my soul.”

Think about a time you struggled. Can you say you are grateful for that struggle? Take some time to write down things you can be grateful about in that struggle.

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