This is a small, but “Meaty” Bible study. It isn't long or hard to understand. It's been a long time for me to sort a lot of this out in my own mind. There are some aspects which are not so black and white as I once thought. I'm not so deeply dogmatic. But this is worth the look to gain a better understanding about who we are in Christ verses the flesh; to ponder and be encouraged... and be inspired to do some of your own study.

1st Thessalonians 5:23 (NIV) - “And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole SPIRIT and SOUL and BODY be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

There are three primary theological views for this Scripture in Christian theology: Trichotomy, Monism, and Dichotomy. Let's briefly examine each. Let's determine which might be the most Biblical.

In the above Scripture, we see that we are comprised of three parts existing as body ("Flesh"), soul and spirit. In theological terms, this is called “Trichotomy” if we hold that some separation of these parts is possible after death (by the literal rendering of the related Scriptures in the Bible). The “Dichotomy” view (discussed in a moment) is a popular alternative held by many Christian evangelicals today. The differences between Trichotomy and Dichotomy are minimal and matter only when certain of theological views are at stake.

A second view is called “Monism.” The more conservative view of this notion says the human condition is a union where separation of the two or three parts is impossible; therefore death (and loss of sentience) is total until the Resurrection. Because the soul isn't immortal, this implies that there isn't eternal suffering in hell for the condemned after Judgment Day. This view is often advocated by liberal Christian theologians and members of cults. Those holding to the notion of “Soul Sleep” (1st Corinthians 15:51/52) also often agree with Monism. Monism isn't typical in mainline Christianity. A spiritualized version of Monism says the physical body and material reality is illusion. This notion is found in certain religions and cults; e.g., Hinduism, Christian Science, Gnosticism, and in the some of the New Age cults. The Monism view simply contradicts too many Scriptures to be acceptable to Christians whom primarily rely upon the plain fundamental meaning of the Bible for what is Truth. In short? Any form of Monism is heresy relative to the views of the fundamentalist Bible-believing Christians.

A third view exists. This view is called “Dichotomy.” It is something of a Greek Christian view. It is also called “Dualism” (a view held by a Greek philosopher called “Plato”). Dichotomy views the human condition to be comprised of two broad aspects, the physical and spiritual. This view holds that the “Spirit” (part) and “Soul” are words for the same aspect, the inner-man or spiritual man. Those holding this view contend the Bible uses the words “Spirit” (part) and “Soul” in an interchangeable manner. This view asserts the “Flesh” (body) has a negative influence upon the soul or human spirit. There is strong Biblical language from the Apostle Paul to support this view (Galatians 5:17, Colossians 3:8/9, and Galatians 5:19-21). However, an alternative variant of this view also exists. It is called “Holistic Dichotomy” (as “Minimal Dualism” or “Interactive Dualism”). This view assumes both the body and soul (spirit) are interactive, but the soul is accountable for sin while the body is not; that the body doesn't help cause sin in the living person. Holistic Dichotomy, while a popular perspective, plainly contradicts some key Scriptures, such as Jude 1:23 and 1st Peter 2:11. It also permits an excuse to pervert the plain meaning of Luke 9:23 and Galatians 2:20.

Dualism Dichotomy is, perhaps, the most Biblical fundamentalist view. This view and
“Trichotomy” are both fairly common in mainline Christianity. A strong case can be made for either view. It is critical to recognize that the Bible teaches that the flesh (body) and soul (as the “Inner-Man” or “Heart”) are both to be blamed for helping to produce sin as confirmed in Jude 1:23, Mark 7:21-23, and similar texts. The soul is corrupted by the flesh (Jude 1:23 and 1st Peter 2:11). Romans 3:23 applies to the soul-spirit aspect of the human being. The human individual isn't innately “Totally Depraved” from birth if we recognize the soul is part of the human individual and isn't necessarily “Total Depraved” even while the “Flesh” may well be “Totally Depraved.” The capacity to sin is likely a mutual effort of both the flesh and the soul given Mark 7:21-23 and Galatians 5:17. It is sin, itself, which causes us to be DEAD before God; and sin condemned by God as inferred by Romans 3:23, not the flesh specifically. After all, the flesh ceases to exist at death; hence Ephesians 6:12.

A friend writes: "If people have an 'immortal soul,' then so do animals because they also had 'the breath of life,' which went back to God when they died in the flood."

I don't think this is necessarily sound logic due to ignoring some other important factors revealed in the Living Word. God plainly did NOT give animals the Image of God regarding sentience and free moral agency.

Yet? If the soul or spirit of an animal is immortal? Is that so bad? If restored to their original form, and God is able to do this as a matter of grace, well... it wouldn't surprise me if animals... all sorts... are in Heaven... none in permanent death, because they have no true moral sentience; therefore... no true accountability before God for sin.

There may well be different kinds of souls in a matter of degree. God speaks though the Apostle Paul revealing a concept regarding the "Glory" of various "Bodies." See 1st Corinthians 15:39-44. He likely is taking about this aspect regarding the differences between souls in the context of the flesh; since the "Glory of a body" is a likely reference to the soul or spirit of an individual as given at the moment of creation (or birth) by God.

I'll agree the spirit (part) of an individual "Returns to God Whom gave it" at death... but this doesn't mean the person is lost in death; their sentience and memories ended. We see a caveat in 1st Corinthians 15:44. We are RAISED in a "Spiritual body;" therefore the “Spirit” (part) of us did NOT "Return to God" in such a manner to imply termination of sentience. Philippians 1:21-24 is clear that departure from the body is to be with Christ, not to be in death, in purgatory, in “Soul Sleep,” in some level of sheol reserved for the “Righteous,” or in a holding area like “Paradise” waiting for the Resurrection. God is clear He is the God of the living, not the “Dead” in Mark 12:27. This is much of the deeper meaning of Galatians 2:20! We are alive NOW forever Christ, not later.

Revelation 21:10 describes being "Called away in spirit" implying sentience! We see Jesus imply the same thing in Matthew 5:3. There are many other New Testament verses along these lines as well. Therefore, the “Spirit” (part) of the human being is MORE than a mere "Spark of life." The Bible is PROGRESSIVE REVELATION to some degree. We can't ignore this obvious aspect of Scripture... as "Precept upon precept" (Isaiah 28:10).

Zechariah 12:1 (KJV) - "The burden of the Word of the LORD for Israel, saith the LORD, which stretcheth forth the heavens, and layeth the foundation of the earth, and formeth the spirit of man within him."

Notice the last part. One can't understand the nature of the human form of body, soul, and spirit (part) without taking all Scripture into account in describing and defining each.
Zechariah 12:1 plainly shows us, again, that the "Spirit" (part) of humanity is MORE than a mere "Spark of life" which returns to God at death (Ecclesiastes 12:7). It must be more if we accept what God says through Paul in Acts 17:28, "For in Him we live and move and have our being."

Even God says He is "Spirit" (John 4:24). God is definitely sentient! If we are created in the Image of God as stated in Genesis, then we are forced to conclude such Image includes having a "Spirit" (part) which is sentient according to the Will of God in creation. We are NOT able to surmise the "Spirit" (part) ever "Dies" (ending of sentience) after the body does. The Scriptures NEVER tell us this. The Bible does seem to tell us that the "Soul" dies in some places, but other places suggests the opposite.

I'll agree there is something of a grey area about the body and soul. By that I mean, even Jewish experts (Christian or otherwise) do NOT all agree about it. Some Messianic “Believers” say the body and soul are the same; a “Living being.” This isn't the position of orthodox Judaism. Even Jewish history tells us there was some disagreement (Acts 23:6-9). However, the Bible DOES tell us a lot about our “Spirit” (part) in terms of total Biblical revelation on the topic.

Perhaps the case can be made the body and soul are mortal. But this can't be PROVEN without making certain assumptions which themselves are debatable. Ditto to the contrary; that the soul is immortal. However, we can find many verses in the Old Testament revealing the soul is self-aware (sentient) while in sheol; that this is implied several times. The critic might say such instances are Hebrew expressions coming from deep passion or hope for reunion. They could have a point. But, again, it can't be proven. It isn't a total black and white issue.

Myself? I lean much more to the understanding of our having an immortal spirit as part of innate reflection the Image of God in His Creation; hence the need for separation of the holy from the unholy at Judgment Day. We see Jesus and John teach about hell and Heaven; that the "Sheep" need to be sorted from the "Goats." If the spirit or soul isn't immortal, then there is no real need for Judgment and sorting, since the wicked are already dead and non-existent. God has no cause to “Resurrect” the wicked mortal dead only to say, “See, I told you that you are evil…” then kill them again. But if the soul or spirit is immortal from initial creation? Then there is a problem. The wicked can't be allowed in Heaven; therefore Judgment is needed to clearly establish that eternal “Hell” is what the immortal wicked deserve. This is my speculation, of course.

1st Corinthians 15:45 - "And so it is written, The first man Adam was made a living soul; the Last Adam [Christ] was made a quickening [living] spirit."

It is in Christ Whom we abide as Christians according to Galatians 2:20. The flesh matters not. We are each a "SPIRIT" in and through Christ.

1st Peter 2:11 - "Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul..."

If the flesh and the soul are the SAME, as some teach, then they will not be able to explain 1st Peter 2:11 without stretching the plain meaning of Scripture. It also happens the word "Soul" in the Greek can mean other things other than "Soul;" e.g., "Life." But the word "Soul" is placed in the Bible by God for a reason... Isaiah 55:9 does seem to apply here.

Yet? For me? Much of this is mute. If we are Made New (John 3:3-8 and 2nd Corinthians 5:17) in Christ, then we are Alive Forever with Him.
Some argue this topic in an effort to prove "Hell" isn't a state eternal suffering. Yet, such argument can't prove the assertion, because Jesus and John both tell us hell is an everlasting "Torment." Those teaching hell isn't real and isn't a place of conscious torment are teaching heresy, in my opinion. So, therefore, SOMETHING DOES go to hell to suffer forever if it never repents and accepts Christ... what that something is? Spirit? Soul? Who knows? It does not matter as a focus. Focus and LOOK to Yeshua (Jesus) instead! He is your LIFE!

"But concerning the dead, that they rise, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the burning bush passage, how God spoke to him, saying, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead, but the God of the living. You are therefore greatly mistaken." [Mark 12:26/27]

Recall that Moses "Died" in the Old Testament. Now He appeared ALIVE on the mount of transfiguration with Jesus! Moses isn't "Dead" to God, but Alive... even BEFORE the "Resurrection" ... after all... isn't Jesus the Resurrection (Present-Tense) and the Life (John 11:25)?

Here is a good objective reference for further study: http://www.gracenotebook.com/pub/87

All my True Love for all is Sealed, Hidden, Found, and Revealed ONLY in Jesus Christ (Yeshua HaMashiach) where we all meet for Perfect Koinonia and Sukkot, Tracy