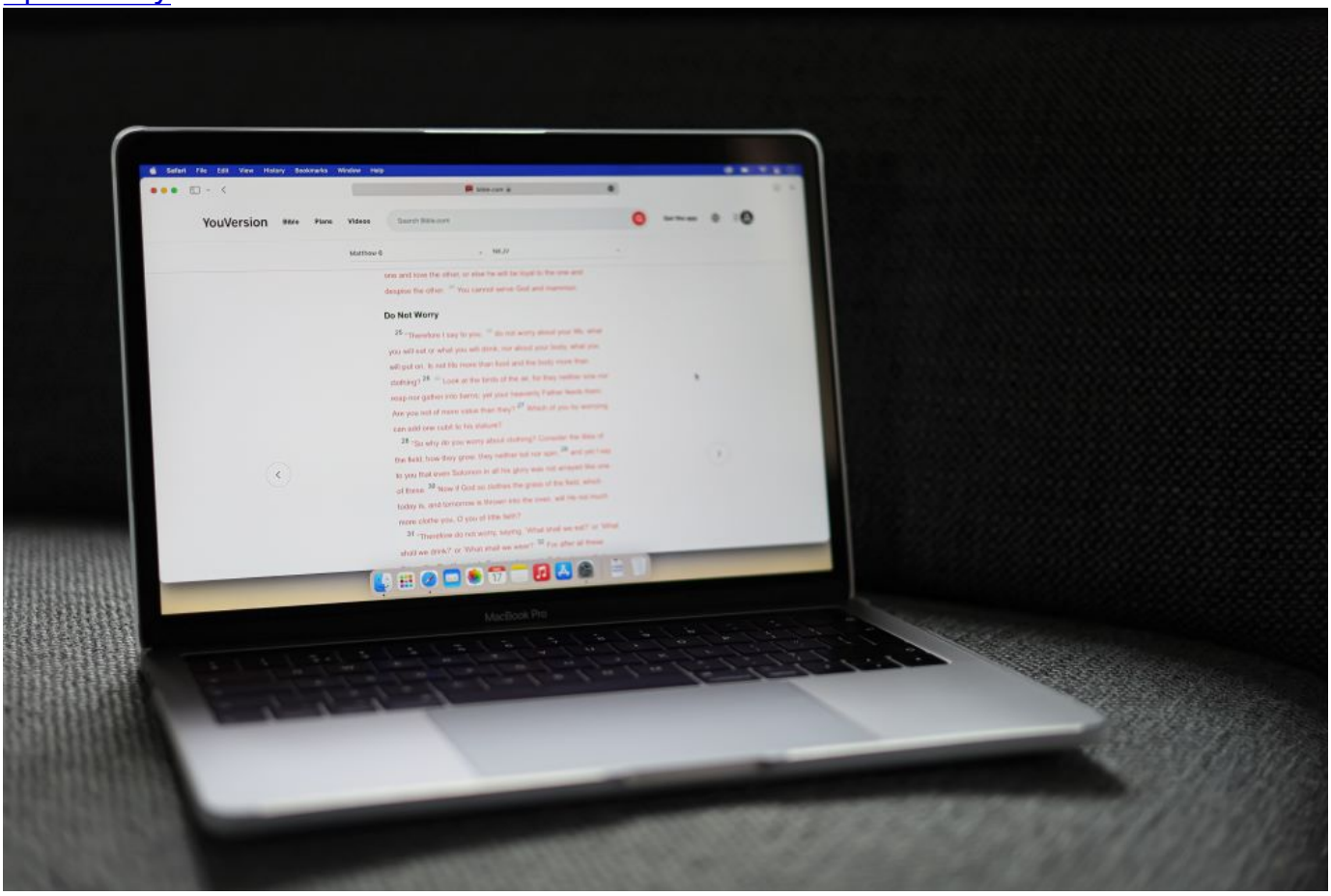
Columns
Spirituality



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Most of us are digital natives, or at least quite happy in the virtual online world, with contacts on Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp. But I specifically remember a conversation I had with my friend before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic that I'd like to share with you. It brought new insight into the meaning of the evangelical counsels.

Virtual reality

"Innovations in the fast-approaching 5G to 10G world of the future are far, very far beyond my imagination," Sister Shirley said on Zoom. "Maybe we'll be able to meet multidimensional models of our dear sisters who live at the opposite end of the globe as if they are standing right in front of us."

"But there'll be no real warmth and feeling from a hug or handshake, for sure," I respond.

Biblical times

"How did people in the Old Testament world see reality?" we wonder and begin debating each other. Finally, I open a copy of the Bible from the digital library on my laptop, out of mere curiosity, to glance through the contents and see what life and relationships look like.

"Hmm …" I'm pleasantly shocked with my discovery as I try to dig, more than two millennia down the timeline, into history and herstory. "There’s a word 'nephesh,' which is mentioned 757 times!" I exclaim.

Sister Shirley is also interested in learning more, and she insists that I should share the screen with her. "What does ‘nephesh’ mean according to the philosophy of language of the biblical characters?" We decide to find out.

The throat

"It is the hungry (Deuteronomy 12:20; 1 Samuel 2:16), thirsty (Proverbs 25:25), covetous (Proverbs 23:2), always dissatisfied, devouring (Habakkuk 2:5), and air-breathing (Genesis 2:7; Jeremiah 2:24) throat with a wide jaw and open mouth wandering with insatiable desire (Ecclesiastes 6:9),' Sister Shirley read.

"The throat seems to define the person," she said.

"In simple terms, they seem to be seeking something in their relationships that will truly fulfill them, isn't it?" I add.

"And how does God react to their wide jaws and open mouths?" asks Sister Shirley, apparently amused.

A joyful noise

"He satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things (Psalms 107:8-9). As soon as they accept God's love without complaining any further, the Hallelujah breaks out from the depths of their hearts through their throats, in gladness (Psalms 150:6). Indeed, it is a joyful cry from their innermost beings," I respond.

Sister Shirley continues the reflection: "God has not only saved their necks from their enemies and preserved their lives (Psalms 105:18; 1 Samuel 28:9) but has also prepared a surprise for the generations to come when Jesus will come to quench their thirst (John 4:13-14) and give them life in abundance (John 10:10)."

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The soul

We are enjoying this venture, and I resume sharing. "Oh! The meaning of 'nephesh' seems to be changing from throat to life itself (Psalms 30:3; Proverbs 8:35)! It is also linked with blood (Leviticus 24:17). Further on, it is identified with the soul and the whole person. From what I gather, the Hebrews have a holistic vision of the human person, and they do not treat the body and soul as two separate or divisible aspects of human life. However, it is now the third century and then the second century B.C. I see how 'nephesh' is being translated into 'psyche' in the Greek Septuagint (Old Testament)."

"Following this translation of the Old Testament, it is being interpreted according to Greek dualistic philosophy which, unfortunately, treats body and soul of the person as two distinct parts," says Sister. Shirley. (She knows Western philosophy, after all.)

Connection lost

There's a thunderstorm and Wi-Fi the connection is unsteady. Power failure follows. We lose our Zoom connection. I return to the present and continue to muse on how

"nephesh" applies to our lives.

The pandemic

Now three years have passed since our last conversation. Sister Shirley is no more. She was gasping so much for breath as she battled the coronavirus between life and death. She had been serving COVID-19 patients as a nurse in the rural hospital.

The pandemic brought us a lot of grief and forced us to review our priorities. The description of nephesh in the Old Testament, which she read aloud to me is still very fresh and vivid in my mind. The memory of "wide jaws and open mouths" is so much like the video clips on news channels showing people waiting for a bed outside hospitals overflowing with patients, as well as images of those on oxygen and ventilators because of infection with the deadly virus.

Desire

But there's more to *nephesh*, I think. Human desire for satisfaction could move us in two different directions. We could either wander with wide jaws and open mouths towards power, wealth and love of earthly pleasures or, as consecrated people, we could direct our gaze toward Christ who promises to give us fullness of life, as he said to the Samaritan woman:

Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again,

but those who drink of the water

that I will give them

will never be thirsty.

The water that I will give

will become in them

a spring of water

gushing up to eternal life.

(John 4:13-14)

Fulfilment

Although social distancing and lockdowns compelled many of us to rely more upon digital communication, we are tired, really. It was a surprise when I discovered the development of the understanding of nephesh in the books of the Bible even though they were written more than two millennia ago. I really drew a lot of inspiration from it to look for fulfilment in Christ. A salute and a prayer for Sister. Shirley and every nurse who commended *nephesh* into God's hands after spending her life in service.