

What is the difference between body, spirit, and soul?

First, I am assuming that you are referring to an individual person. Second, I am also assuming that you are asking this question in reference to what the Bible teaches or some particular Biblical passage and not what men have said through the many years these things mean. Perhaps you are thinking about 1 Thessalonians 5:23 where we read, “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.” So having those two assumptions in mind, let’s search the scriptures to see what we can find.

First, we find that the body is a person’s physical corpse. If you search for the word body in the King James Version, you will find that when it is used to refer to a person, it almost always refers to the person’s individual body or corpse. In Genesis 3:19 God said that man was made out of dust and he would return to dust when his life was finished. In Ecclesiastes 12:7 there is also a reference to the body returning to dust. So the body is a physical entity which will one day die; and it is appointed that all men will die (Hebrews 9:27). Additionally, we do find the word body used by Paul to describe something that is spiritual, but this is the “resurrected body.” You may want to study 1 Corinthians 15 (the whole chapter) to learn a little more about this. The majority of the time, however, “body” refers to the physical corpse (whether living or dead) of a person.

Second, there is a relationship between the body and the spirit. The same passage in Ecclesiastes 12:7 says that when the body returns to dust, the spirit will return to God who gave it. We also read in James 2:26 that the body apart from the spirit is dead. So when a spirit inhabits a body, that body is said to be alive. While we are alive, we are to bring glory to God both through the body and the spirit (1 Corinthians 6:20). So the spirit and the body are two separate things.

Sometimes, the word “spirit” refers to the immortal aspect of man (Acts 7:59). Sometimes the word spirit refers to some heavenly being (Hebrews 1:14). The word spirit is also used to refer to God’s Spirit—the Holy Spirit (Genesis 1:2; Acts 2:4). The word spirit can also refer to an evil spiritual entity (Acts 19:15, 16). It is also used to reflect a person’s attitude (Numbers 5:14) and to reflect a person’s character (Exodus 28:3). At least once it is used to refer to just “life” as in Ecclesiastes 3:21 in reference to the spirit of the beast (the animation of the beast).

Third, is there a difference between the spirit and the soul? Sometimes there is and sometimes there is not. The basic meaning of the word soul is “life.” Sometimes it refers to the immortal aspect of man just like the word spirit does (Psalm 16:10, Acts 2:27, Matthew 16:26; Hebrews 6:19). Sometimes it refers to a person’s body (Leviticus 5:2, 4). Sometimes it refers to an individual person and their life (Romans 13:1).

Is there a difference between soul and spirit? Hebrews 4:12 says that there is a difference but that it is a fine distinction. The difference is one of description. The word “spirit” refers to something that is animated, whether it is animated only for a temporary time (such as a beast) or if it is animated forever (such as our immortal spirit). The word “soul” refers to the idea of “life.” Here too, sometimes life can be limited to THIS life. But sometimes it refers to eternal life as well. Do these ideas refer to two different entities that exist separately within the individual person? I don’t think so. I don’t think that the individual person has both a soul and a spirit where each of those things refer to an entity that is specifically different within man. In this sense, the word spirit and soul are synonymous. However, there is a way to understand that we have both a spirit and a soul. We have a spirit, something animated and eternal that will live on forever. This idea looks at us objectively from the outside. We also have a soul, a life that is eternal, our consciousness. This idea looks at us subjectively from the inside.

Now, what did Paul mean when he used these words in 1 Thessalonians 5:23? First, he was writing to them regarding their resurrection. He wanted them to know that Jesus was going to come back some day and that they should be prepared for it. In this context he prayed that their body, soul, and spirit would be “preserved blameless.” Paul wanted them to be pure and to prepare themselves for the Second Coming of Christ. He uses these three concepts not necessarily to draw a distinction between them, but to fortify the idea that he is talking about the WHOLE person; not just the body, but man’s internal spirit as well. He leaves no doubt that both our body and our spiritual nature play a role in our ultimate salvation. This is significant because some were teaching in that time that only man’s spiritual nature played a role in their salvation and they could do with the body anything they wanted. Others suggested just the opposite. Paul affirms that both the body and man’s spirit must be “preserved blameless.”

So to answer your question, the body is the corpse. The spirit refers to man’s eternal spirit in an objective sense, and the soul refers to man’s spirit in a more subjective sense,

but spirit and soul seem to refer to the same thing when being used to describe man's eternal nature.