

XXXI. Resurrection Bodies

April 1/3, 2014

1 Corinthians 15:29-49

Aim: To look forward to the resurrection by understanding the glorious nature of our resurrection bodies.

A. Resurrection Incentives (I Corinthians 15:29-34)

Paul's major thrust in 15:29-34 is: if you remove the resurrection, if you deny this crucial and wonderful truth of God's redemptive work, you have removed one of the greatest motivations the Lord gives for coming to Christ and for living for Christ.

1. An Incentive for Salvation (15:29)

²⁹*Otherwise, what do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?*

a) *Baptism for the Dead*

Suddenly, with something of a bump, we are returned from this vision of eternal glory to a very earthly problem, the terms of which baffle every Bible scholar. What is Paul talking about? He does not seem to be commending or rebuking the practice, but to what is he referring? The most obvious meaning seems to be either that people were being baptized for dead believers, who had not been baptized during their earthly lives, or being baptized on behalf of unbelievers, perhaps in the hope that this would be of benefit to them for their salvation. Several commentators draw attention to the fact that baptism seems to have been very important in Corinthian thinking (cp. 1:13-17). This might possibly indicate to the Corinthians there was some spiritual kudos to be gained according to the identity of the person who had baptized you, and this may have led to an increase of the party spirit that was lining up behind the rival leaders.

Some of the Corinthians were actually being baptized on behalf of their friends who had died without baptism. Nowhere does the Bible teach this practice, and Paul certainly doesn't condone it. He does mention it, however, to further support his argument for the resurrection of the dead. If Jesus does not rise from the grave, the dead are hopelessly lost, and this practice made no sense at all. This practice was just another indication of the depth of the Corinthians' confusion on this vital matter of the resurrection. On the one hand, they were denying the resurrection. On the other hand, they were practicing something that was senseless apart from it.

It seems some believers in Corinth have lost their lives under persecution before an opportunity arose for baptism, and that others have been baptized 'in their place' (*hyper*), by substitution. Presumably this was done for pastoral reasons, to assure surviving believers—including family members—that all that baptism signified was true for the deceased. It deserves to be noted that Paul merely refers to this practice and does not prescribe it. It is to be doubted that Mormon baptism for the dead can be sustained by this reference. Their practice of baptizing thousands of deceased persons vicariously and maintaining their records in disused rocket silos in the USA is bizarre in the extreme!

It appears that at Corinth some converts were being baptized on behalf of, or with reference to, 'the dead' ('on behalf of' from *hyper* + a genitive: *tōn nekrōn*). 'Are being baptized' (present tense, *baptizomenoi*) suggests that baptisms with this motivation were then taking place and

1 Corinthians – Lesson 31

might not have been deemed unusual. Paul's point is that if the physically dead are extinct, there can be no link between them and living believers.

b) Baptism Because of the Dead (per MacArthur)

This verse is one of the most difficult in all of Scripture, and has many legitimate possible interpretations; it has also, however, been used to support many strange and heretical ideas. We can be dogmatic, from the clear teaching of other parts of Scripture, about some of the things it does *not* mean. As to what the verse does mean, we can only guess, since history has locked it into obscurity.

We can be sure, for example, that it does not teach vicarious, or proxy, baptism for the dead, as claimed by ancient gnostic heretics such as Marcion and by the Mormon church today. Paul did not teach that a person who has died can be saved, or helped in any way, by another person's being baptized in his behalf. Baptismal regeneration, the idea that one is saved by being baptized or that baptism is in some way necessary for salvation, is unscriptural. The idea of vicarious baptismal regeneration is still further removed from biblical truth. If a person cannot save himself by being baptized, he certainly cannot save anyone else through that act. No one is saved through baptism—not even living persons, much less dead ones.

In the early church, baptism, while not a requirement of salvation, was closely associated. A person was not baptized unless the church was satisfied he was saved. To ask, then, if a person was baptized, was equivalent to asking if he was saved. If we assume Paul was using the term *baptized* in that sense, then 'those ... who are baptized' could refer to those who were giving testimony that they were Christians. In other words, he was simply referring to believers under the title of 'those who are baptized,' not to some special act of baptism. 'The dead' could also refer to Christians, to deceased believers whose lives were a persuasive testimony leading to the salvation of the baptized.

The Greek *hyper*, translated 'for' in verse 29, has a dozen or more meanings and shades of meaning, depending on the grammatical structure. Although 'for' is a perfectly legitimate translation here, in light of the context and of Paul's clear teaching elsewhere, 'because of' could also be a proper rendering. In light of that reasoning and interpretation, we could guess that Paul may have simply been saying that people were being saved (baptism being the sign) because of the exemplary lives and witness of faithful believers who had died. Whether this is the right interpretation of this verse we cannot be certain, but we can be certain that people often come to salvation because of the testimony of those whom they desire to emulate.

Another way in which the believing 'dead' are used as a means of salvation is through the hope of reunion. Many believers have been drawn to the Savior because of a strong desire to be united with a loved one who has gone to be with the Lord. And thus, if there is no resurrection, no hope of a future life, Paul asked, why are people coming to Christ because of the testimony of believers who have died?

2. An Incentive for Service (15:30-32)

a) Paul's Struggle (15:30-32a)

³⁰Why are we in danger every hour? ³¹I protest, brothers, by my pride in you, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die every day! ³²What do I gain if, humanly speaking, I fought with beasts at Ephesus?

1 Corinthians – Lesson 31

The second incentive that hope of the resurrection gives is that for service. Why, otherwise, would believers endure and sacrifice so much? If this life were the end, what would be the reason for Paul's and the other apostles' being 'in danger every hour'? The only thing that makes Christians willing to work hard, willing to suffer, willing to be abused and ridiculed, willing to endure in the work of Christ is that Christ's own supreme finished work, the redemption of sinners, will last past this present life (cp. Rom. 8:18). What would be the purpose of suffering for Christ if we would never see Him face to face?

As an apostle who preached Christ crucified and risen, his own life was exposed to constant danger. Why would he choose to live so precariously if the resurrection of Christ is not historically true? Paul's concerns about the dangers of Ephesus (the city from which he is writing this letter) proved to be well founded. He narrowly escaped death from a riot, forcing him from the city (Acts 19:23-20:1; 2 Cor. 1:8-10). Paul is not referring to facing wild animals in verse 32; however, he did contend with ferocious men.

We cannot be certain that Paul fought literal 'wild beasts at Ephesus,' but it seems entirely possible that such was the case, and this interpretation is supported by tradition. It may be that Paul was speaking metaphorically of the wild crowd of Ephesians that was incited against him by the silversmith Demetrius (Acts 19:23-34). In any case, he was speaking of one of his many dangerous, life-threatening experiences.

If the resurrection does not occur, the nature of the daily lifestyle that Paul had chosen to live would not have any significance. In this next section, we re-visit an emphasis from the earlier part of the letter, where the persecution and suffering Paul had endured as a faithful apostle of Christ was seen to reflect the spirituality of the cross much more clearly than the Corinthians' divisive triumphalism (see 4:8-16). Paul endures this sort of sacrificial lifestyle, with all its dangers and uncertainties, because he is living in the present with his gaze firmly fixed on eternity. The thing that gives him the greatest satisfaction is that they are Christians who have arrived at *eternal* life through his sacrificial work. If however there is no resurrection, there is not the slightest point at all.

Paul maintains that he does not exaggerate when stating that death and he stare each other in the face, and swears by all that is most precious, yet excluding vainglory. Paul informs the church that he is ready to suffer the consequences if he is less than honest about his claim. Paul was willing to undergo all these things, and more, because he knew that Jesus had risen from the grave. But he would have been a colossal fool to live like this had Jesus not risen.

b) A Pagan Saying (15:32b)

If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."

Why would Paul have endured these things, he was saying, and have continued to endure such things, if his only purpose and only hope was merely human and temporary? If we love only to die and remain dead, it makes more sense to say, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die'—a direct quotation from Isaiah 22:13 that reflected the hopeless and hedonistic view of the backslidden Israelites. If we die only to remain dead, hedonism makes perfect sense. What does not make sense is the godly self-sacrifice of Paul, the apostles, and all the saints.

As an example of living just for the 'here and now,' Paul quotes Isaiah 22:13. Of course, eat and drink we must. But is eating and drinking all there is to human existence? 'Surely there must be more,' our consciences cry. The resurrection of the dead, however, immediately introduces an

1 Corinthians – Lesson 31

element of accountability. For I will be caught up in that resurrection to give account to God my judge as to how I have lived this one life that was assigned to me.

Paul alludes to Isaiah 22:13 I order to bring into relief the folly of serving a dead Jesus. The apostle parallels the Corinthian skeptics with the scoffers of Isaiah's Jerusalem, patterns of unbelief leapfrogging time and culture. If the skeptics are right, the Corinthians, Paul, and his colleagues might as well yield to license, their only viable option if the grave is the absolute end.

The only coherent worldview without the resurrection would be: 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die. That is how unbelievers live, and Paul warns the Corinthian Christians that if they persist in their unbelief about the resurrection, that is where they too will inevitably drift.

3. An Incentive for Sanctification (15:33-34)

a) *Do Not Be Deceived (15:33)*

³³*Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals."*

Having quoted the Hebrew prophet, Paul introduces a line from a Greek poet, Menander (c. 342-291 BC), which in those days might have been a proverb. Paul appeals to a worldly proverb to show that the Corinthians lack common sense as well as spiritual insight. The proverb quoted is frequently experienced in life. We become like those with whom we habitually spend time. They are being deceived by the bad company of the skeptics.

The third incentive the hope of resurrection gives is for sanctification. *Homilia* ('company') basically means an association of people, but also can have the connotation of a lecture or sermon. It seems possible, therefore, that the Corinthians were both listening to some wrong teaching and associating with some evil people. Whether the teaching was in formal messages or not, it was 'bad' and corrupting. The context implies that the 'bad company' was teaching the heretical theology that there is no resurrection of the dead, and that bad theology had corrupted 'good morals.' Just as hoping in the resurrection is an incentive to obedience and holiness, so disbelief of it is an incentive to disobedience and immorality. Their bad theology was leading to bad behavior, especially because they denied the resurrection.

Paul is not speaking generally here. Rather, he is still addressing the precise situation where there are 'some who say there is no resurrection of the dead' (v. 12). First, he speaks to the congregation as a whole: 'Don't *you* be led astray....' Hold firmly to the gospel, whose core belief is the resurrection of Christ from the dead (vv. 4-5). Second, he refers obliquely to those who deny the resurrection as 'bad company' that 'leads astray' and 'corrupts' other.

How could the Corinthians ever gotten into the position of denying such a fundamental truth as the resurrection of the body? Paul gives us the answer. They had done the same thing at this point that they had done in so many other areas. They had allowed the beliefs of their society to contaminate and corrupt their own thinking. Instead of allowing true doctrine to reform their sinful practices, the Corinthians had allowed their sinful practices to shape their doctrine. Instead of boldly declaring the undiluted message of the gospel to their society, they had tried to make the gospel more appealing by mixing pagan notions with it.

b) *Do Not Continue Sinning (15:34)*

³⁴*Wake up from your drunken stupor, as is right, and do not go on sinning. For some have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame.*

1 Corinthians – Lesson 31

Verse 34 is a strong and uncompromising conclusion. To deny the resurrection is both senseless and sinful. They need to think through the implications of the false teaching that they seem so ready to embrace and to work out the logic of what no resurrection would imply. They need to revisit the powerful historical evidence that proves that Christ is indeed risen from the dead. They need to recognize the sinfulness of denying that there is a resurrection, because of the willful and determined unbelief of such an act, and to repent.

Paul pleads in the imperative. ‘Those of you who believe in the resurrection know better, and you should be leading those who do not believe in the resurrection into a true “knowledge of God,” rather than allowing their heresy and their immorality to mislead and corrupt you.’ They had the truth, but they did not fully believe it and therefore did not fully follow it. He commands them to cease the sin they were involved in.

To ‘sober up’ (*eknēfō*) means to rouse oneself from a stupor. Because being influenced by those who deny resurrection is like participating in a drunken bout, the church must wake up and renounce the company of evil men.

Paul also speaks indirectly of another group, those who are ‘ignorant of God’ (*agnōsian...theou*). It is a matter of ‘shame’ that some among them are so ignorant of God and vulnerable to corruption. Here is a call to teach the gospel clearly and effectively.

If the Corinthians expected to win the unbelievers around them, they had to stop associating with them in their sinful practices and stop diluting the gospel so it would be acceptable to them. The Christian’s success in reaching pagans lies not in minimizing the difference Christianity makes, but in maximizing it.

B. Resurrection Principles (I Corinthians 15:35-41)

Significantly, ‘body’ (*soma*) does not appear in 15:1-34 but occurs eight times in 15:35-58, ‘dead [body]’ (*nekros*) appearing ten times in 15:1-34 but only three times in 15:35-58. We gain the impression that, unlike the Corinthians, Paul is not concerned with the resuscitation of corpses, his burden being to show that the resurrection body will not be a reanimation of that which we now possess. Differentiating between ‘dead’ and ‘body,’ he seeks to correct a misunderstanding of what the historical resurrection of Christ was and what the resurrection of the saints will be.

Starting in verse 35, Paul anticipates questions skeptics will ask about the resurrection and addresses them. God will raise our bodies by His irresistible power in a process of *transformation*. Paul’s reasoning is based on his awareness that God’s creation – His temporal and eternal worlds – is infinitely more wonderful than our present senses can ever begin to appreciate or understand. We must not limit God either to what we have already seen or experienced, or to what we think we can understand. But we have to start with those things in order to begin to comprehend what lies beyond them. So, in answering his questioner, Paul begins with the natural world that we do know, and draws from it two illustrations of a principle that is to be applied to the world that we do not yet know.

1. Resurrection Is Questioned (15:35-36a)

a) *Skeptical Questions (15:35)*

³⁵*But someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?”*

1 Corinthians – Lesson 31

Those in Corinth who denied the resurrection did so primarily because of the influence of gnostic philosophy, which considered the body to be inherently evil and only the spirit to be good. They therefore believed that the resurrection of the body is *undesirable*. Paul now challenges the idea that the resurrection also is *impossible*. Many rabbis of that time misinterpreted such passages as Job 19:26 ('Yet from my flesh I shall see God') to conclude that resurrection bodies will be identical to earthly bodies in every way. To Gnostics, that view made resurrection seem even *less* desirable and possible. But why would anyone who acknowledges a creator God think His restoring bodies, in whatever way, would be any more difficult for Him than making them in the first place?

There can be little doubt that Paul has been told that some represent the resurrection of the body as a macabre reanimation of a corpse. This is why he anticipates sarcastic questions raised against what he has written so far. If the cynics could have been introduced to Paul, they might have endeavored to tie him up by asking how rotten corpses are supposed to recover from decomposition. And if, for the sake of argument, they conceded that it might just happen, they would have quizzed him further about the appearance of the living dead.

Paul goes to the heart of the skeptics' position by stating the two questions they continually asked when the subject of resurrection was brought up. The first question focused on the seeming impossibility of decaying, disintegrating bodies being raised up. What about bodies that have been dead for thousands of years? What about bodies that have been devoured and digested by beasts? Resurrection skeptics today wonder how it is possible for a body that has been blown to bits in an explosion to be raised up.

The second question sought to destroy the idea of the resurrection by suggesting that the kind of body that would come out of the grave was incomprehensible. Would it be just like this body? Would it be a heavenly body, or an earthly body? Would it be mortal or immortal? As far as the skeptics were concerned, the difficulty of these questions proved conclusively that the whole idea of a resurrection with absurd.

b) Skeptical Attitudes (15:36a)

³⁶*You foolish person!*

When Paul comments, 'You foolish person!', he is not dismissing the problem as unworthy of his consideration. Indeed, he is going to take the next thirteen verses to answer it, at some length. His rebuke is intended for the attitude that lay behind the question. Like the skeptics of our own time, they were using the difficulty of understanding how it could happen, to ridicule the idea that it ever could happen at all. That *is* foolishness, because it leads to accepting only what our finite reason can fathom, and ultimately to denying the infinity of God and all supernatural demonstrations of His absolute authority and power.

While not denying the complexity of the subject, Paul makes it clear that the problems were by no means insurmountable. Paul begins his discussion of this question in shocking fashion. He doesn't commend the doubters for their contributions to the ongoing theological discussion. Neither does he commend them for being sensitive to the intellectual trends of their society. He simply calls them 'fools.'

The interlocutor is addressed as 'simpleton' (*aphrōn* = 'senseless'). The word was used derisively of one who does not use or does not have understanding. The questions mentioned in verse 35 were not those of someone who wanted to know but were the mocking taunts of

1 Corinthians – Lesson 31

someone who thought he already knew. Arguments against the resurrection are worthless because the resurrection is certain.

The Corinthians were very proud of their intellects, but on this particular matter, they had made a couple of assumptions that made them look anything but intellectual. They assumed the resurrection was totally unlike anything they were familiar with, and therefore, couldn't possibly happen.

2. Resurrection Is Natural (15:36b-38)

To point up the foolishness of the objection, Paul gives a common illustration from nature. In three significant ways resurrection is similar to the planting and growth of crops: the original form is dissolved, the original and final forms are different in kind, and yet the two forms have a continuity. Resurrection is not impossible, because it occurs on a small scale continuously in the plant world.

a) *Seeds Die to Produce the Plant (15:36b)*

What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.

All the Corinthians had to do to see the principle of resurrection at work was to take a good look at the natural realm. There, life comes out of death on a regular basis. When a seed is planted, it dies and decays; however, from that dead, decaying seed springs a beautiful, fruitful plant (cp. Job 14:7; Jn. 12:24). The skeptical Corinthians, in their proud intellectualism, had walked right by the principle of resurrection on the way to the church meeting where they scoffed at it! No wonder Paul calls them fools!

Paul's point is that you cannot provide for next year's harvest by taking this year's full-grown stalks and replanting them in the ground. But once they have died, then the seeds that they have produced may be used. Death is the condition of rebirth, albeit in a totally different form from the original seed. Just as with growing crops, there had to be an end to the old before there could be a beginning of the new. In the case of men, one body will die to give life to another.

b) *Seeds Differ from the Plant (15:37)*

³⁷*And what you sow is not the body that is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain.*

In an agricultural age, when everyone depended on sowing and reaping, two things were obvious. On the one hand, the seed you sow 'dies' in the ground before it sprouts with life (v. 36), and on the other, the plant that rises from the soil has a *different* body from the naked seed that was sown. The self-same seed that dies in the ground is raised in a transformed body. The same is true of the resurrection of the dead. I who die will be raised alive, but changed into a different form.

Second, both in the growing of crops and in the resurrection of bodies there is a difference between the original and final forms. When Jesus was raised from the dead His glorified body was radically different from the one that died. What came out of the grave was different from what was placed in the grave. It was no longer limited by time, space, and material substance. During His appearances, Jesus went from one place to another without traveling in any physical way. He appeared and disappeared at will, and entered rooms without opening the door (Lk. 24:15, 31, 36; Jn. 20:19; etc.). In His earthly body He had done none of those things.

1 Corinthians – Lesson 31

Resurrection changed Jesus' body in marvelous and radical ways, and at His return *all* resurrection bodies will be changed marvelously and radically.

Death is disorganization leading to reorganization rather than annihilation. Paul reminds the cynic that the seed he sows does not resemble the full-grown plant. The rule never fails, a mature plant stemming from the original seed even though there is no outward resemblance. The underlying principle is that bodily death leading to resurrection operates in the same fashion: although physical disorganization is the preliminary for future life, the resurrection body will not be similar to the present body.

c) Seeds Have Continuity with the Plant (15:38)

³⁸*But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body.*

Third, in spite of the differences, there is nevertheless a continuity between the old and the new. The seed changes radically, but it continues as the same life form. A wheat seed does not become barley, and a flax seed does not become corn. After Jesus was raised, no one recognized Him unless He revealed Himself to them. But once revealed, He was recognizable. The disciples knew His face, and they recognized His wounded side and His pierced hands. In a similar way, our resurrected bodies as believers will have a continuity with the bodies we have now. Our bodies will die and they will change form, but they will still be *our* bodies.

The plant which emerges has a direct continuity with the seed which has died and been buried. You do not plant an apple seed and see a plum tree grow. Plant life is organized by God in such a way that though the general principle of planting and fruiting is the same in all, each individual specimen has its own distinctive body. But when that body is full-grown it would appear to bear no relationship at all to what was planted months earlier. There is an amazing difference, as well as a hidden continuity. What achieves this 'miracle' is the purpose and power of the divine initiative in all this – 'But God.'

Whatever grows does so because the Lord has decreed it, and it will be just the same for God's people when they rise. Although 'it' is the seed being planted by the skeptic, the application of the figure concerns the resurrection body, the corpse being the initial 'seed.'

This is the key for beginning to understand the mysteries of the resurrection. For those believers still alive when Christ returns, their bodies will be changed, in an instant. But for the great majority of believers the body must die and decay. Death is the inevitable gateway to life immortal. The earthly body will be sown like a seed and our flesh will decay. However, just as the plant is both different from the seed and also continuous with it, so the resurrection body will be completely new and yet totally connected to the seed which was sown. God brings from the dead seed a truly new life form, with its own personal distinctiveness. It is this thought that leads the apostle to explore his second illustration that focuses on the differences between the life forms God has made, the emphasis being on their individuality and distinction.

3. Resurrection Is Supernatural (15:39-41)

a) Different Flesh (15:39)

³⁹*For not all flesh is the same, but there is one kind for humans, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish.*

Paul starts with the observation that 'not all flesh is the same,' indicating the amazing variety of earthly bodies God has made. This is important since it begins to undermine the skepticism that

1 Corinthians – Lesson 31

denies the resurrection because it is so different from anything we see or experience in the present. The point being pressed home is that although the resurrection body will be flesh, the skeptic is not to imagine that it must be like the category of flesh that we experience now. The ghastly idea of the ‘living dead’ is exploded.

Why does nature function as it does? It is because a powerful God is in control. He made all different kinds of seeds, and he decided that plants should come out of dead, decaying seeds. He is the one who created the human body, as well as the bodies for the animals, fish, and birds.

b) Different Glory (15:40-41)

⁴⁰*There are heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is of one kind, and the glory of the earthly is of another. ⁴¹There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory.*

If looking at these earthly bodies does not convince us of His might and power, all we have to do is look to the heavenly bodies. How can we explain the vastness and the variety there? The only logical explanation is to say it all came from the hand of a powerful creator. Furthermore, ‘earthly bodies’ and ‘heavenly bodies’ anticipates ‘the man from the earth,’ and the ‘man from heaven’ (v. 47).

When we think of the inanimate creation, whether in the heavens or on earth, we see the infinite variety of ways in which God is able to organize the physical constituents of the created order so as to produce our environment of such complexity and magnificence. No wonder the word that keeps occurring in these verses is ‘glory’ (*doxa*)! The point is that if we find it hard to imagine that God can raise up His people in new resurrection bodies, we have not been looking round sufficiently at His glory manifested in the present creation. Compare human flesh with that of a butterfly – both created by God. Compare the blazing summer sun with the peaceful light of the moon, or with the scintillating beauty of the stars.

Think of the majestic glory of a mountain range, or the restless pounding of the ocean breaking on the shore. Focus in on the individual and unique complexity of each snowflake, or the tiniest alpine flower. They are all totally different from each other, and yet each is created and sustained by the one sovereign Creator. Learn from the variety within the creation that we *can* see, something of the wonders of that new creation that we *yet* to see. Does this not prove that the resources of this unimaginably glorious God are totally without limit? He is infinite in power to accomplish His purposes. So why limit God with foolish questions about how dead bodies can possibly be reconstituted?

God has infinite creative capacity, including the capacity to make infinite variety. Why would anyone think it hard for Him to re-create and resurrect human bodies, no matter what the form may be? ‘So also is the resurrection of the dead.’ Resurrection bodies will differ from earthly bodies just as radically as heavenly bodies differ from earthly. And resurrection bodies will be as individual and unique as are all the other forms of God’s creation.

The skeptics were in the ludicrous position of acknowledging that God had, in mighty power, created all these things, but denying that same power when the resurrection came up! If you believe in the power of God at every other point, why not believe it at this point? So how does Paul answer the question of how the dead are raised? He simply leaves it in the powerful hands of the same God who made all things, including making plants come out of dead seeds!

1 Corinthians – Lesson 31

C. Resurrection Bodies (1 Corinthians 15:42-49)

What does Paul have to say to the skeptics about what the resurrection body will be like?

1. Original vs. Resurrection Bodies (15:42-44)

The first point Paul makes is that the resurrected body will be vastly superior to the bodies we now have. It is apparent in these verses that Paul still has the analogy of the seed and the plant in mind. He likens these physical bodies to the seed that dies and decays in the ground and the resurrected body to the plant that springs up. Through a series of contrasts, Paul indicates that the resurrection body will be as superior to this body as the plant is to the seed!

Our resurrection bodies will be different from our present mortal bodies, because they need to be adapted to a different kind of existence. Therefore, in the contrasts that follow, the emphasis is entirely on the superiority in every way of that which is to come, over that which we currently experience. This has the dual effect of both explaining more about the nature of the resurrection and also of motivating us to look forward to it.

In verses 35-41 Paul illustrates the principle of continuity and transformation. Paul now uses the words ‘sown’ and ‘raised’ in a rapid fire sequence of contrasts that springs from the second analogy, the distinction between ‘the earthly’ and ‘the heavenly.’ Believers share with other descendants of Adam the frailties of life in this present age, its corruption, dishonor, weakness and ‘souliness.’ From this fallible fallen existence, however, believers will be raised alive into the imperishability, glory, power, and spirituality of the coming age.

Focusing more directly on the resurrection body, Paul here mentions specific ways, given as four sets of contrasts, in which our glorified bodies will be different from our earthly bodies.

a) *Durability (15:42)*

⁴²*So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable.*

The first contrast pertains to durability. One of the most obvious characteristics of all natural life, including human life, is that it is ‘perishable,’ subject to deterioration and eventual death. Even the healthiest of people, as they get older, become weaker and more subject to disease and various physical problems. Death, of course, rapidly accelerates decay. Without exception, every human being is ‘sown,’ that is born, with a ‘perishable body.’ But the resurrection body of the believer will be ‘raised an imperishable body.’ Our new bodies will know no sickness, decay, deterioration, or death.

It is clear that ‘perishability’ is a distinctive characteristic of the human body. By nature we are subject to decay and deterioration, and that process which we experience throughout life does not end at death. But the body that will be raised has the very quality that could never be true of an earthly body – it is ‘imperishable’; it will never perish or decay. This is a different kind of glory, an order of magnificence beyond our present comprehension.

Again, the picture is that of the field, the seed buried in the earth living on as the full-grown plant. But the metaphor incorporates a factor that is no part of the natural process: in the present scheme the flow that develops from the seed must itself fade away. With respect to the resurrection of the body, the pattern is different: a dying thing transmutes into that which cannot die. Within the New Testament, ‘corruption’ sometimes means moral degradation (as in 2 Pe.

1 Corinthians – Lesson 31

1:4; 2:19), whereas ‘incorruptibility’ can signify moral purity (as in Eph. 6:24). Now we perish; then, never. Where there is no sin there can be no death.

b) Value (15:43a)

⁴³*It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory.*

The second contrast has to do with value and potential. At the Fall man’s potential for pleasing and serving God was radically reduced. Not only his mind and his spirit but also his body became of immeasurably less value in doing what God had designed it to do. Through sin, that which was created to honor God became characterized instead by ‘dishonor.’ Even the most faithful believer dies with his body in a state of dishonor, a state of imperfection and incompleteness. But that imperfect and dishonored body one day will be ‘raised in glory.’ Throughout eternity our new immortal bodies will also be honorable bodies, perfected for pleasing, praising, and enjoying the Creator who made them and the Redeemer who restored them.

The word translated ‘dishonor’ is used to indicate loss of rights, as, for example, rights of citizenship. To be a ‘stateless’ person is to have no right of permanent above, to be a permanent alien and stranger.

‘In dishonor’ and ‘in splendor’ are adjectival, describing the state of the body rather than the manner of burial, or – for the Christian – how it is subsequently raised. Paul insists that a dead body is a lifeless thing, lacking beauty and fit only for covering up. But when the believer is raised, he will possess a glory similar to that of his Lord.

c) Ability (15:43b)

It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power.

The third contrast has to do with ability. Our present bodies are characterized by ‘weakness.’ We are weak not only in physical strength and endurance but also in resistance to disease and harm. Our earthly ‘temples’ are inescapably temporary and fragile. But not so our new bodies, which will be ‘raised in power.’ We are not told what that power will entail, but it will be immeasurable compared to what we now possess. We will no longer have to say that ‘the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak’ (Mt. 26:41). Anything our heavenly spirits determine to do our heavenly bodies will be able to accomplish.

Furthermore, Paul says this body is ‘sown in weakness.’ We know he is right. There is very little power in this physical body during life, and there is absolutely no power at all when death comes. The resurrected body, however, will not want for power. All limitations will be gone, and power will be just as characteristic of us then as weakness is now.

‘In weakness’ and ‘in power’ describe the condition of the body respectively at death and later at the resurrection, rather than the manner in which it is buried and how it is to be lifted up. Life hangs on the thinnest of threads and a dead body is an eloquent symbol of total human weakness; it is utterly powerless. But the resurrection body transcends all such limitations. It will be full of divine power and the ability to live forever in the presence of its eternal Creator.

d) Realm (15:44)

⁴⁴*It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.*

1 Corinthians – Lesson 31

The fourth area of contrasts has to do with the sphere, or realm, of existence. Our earthly body is strictly ‘natural.’ That is the only realm in which it can live and function. The physical body is suited for and limited to the physical world. The new body of the believer, however, will be ‘raised a spiritual body.’ Our spirits now reside in earthly bodies, but one day they will reside in spiritual bodies. In every way we then will be spiritual beings. In both spirit and body we will be perfectly suited for heavenly living. In the resurrection everything about us will be perfected for all eternity. We will not be the same as angels, but we will be ‘like’ them in that we too will be perfectly equipped and suited for heavenly, spiritual, supernatural, living.

Finally, Paul says this body is ‘natural.’ It was made for this natural realm and is ideally suited for it. But the next world is of an entirely different order. It is a spiritual world, and to live there, one must have a spiritual body. Needless to say, the resurrected body will be ideally suited to that spiritual world.

By ‘natural body’ (*sōma psychikon*) is meant the conventional human frame with its habitat in this world. The characteristics of the ‘spiritual body’ (*soma pneumatikon*) can only be inferred by the teaching of the New Testament elsewhere concerning the risen Savior, which shows that it will not be immaterial.

In the final contrast, Paul’s vocabulary and focus becomes specifically Corinthian, as he picks up terms which have been used elsewhere in the letter and which were among the ‘buzz’ words of the congregation he is addressing. The natural (*psychikos*) body is compared with the spiritual (*pneumatikos*) body. The former describes our present experience, the latter that which is yet to be. But some of the Corinthians were describing themselves as ‘spiritual’ already (cp. 2:14-16).

If some of the Corinthians were claiming to be fully ‘spiritual’ already and so to have already experienced the resurrection, Paul’s response is that they can only enter into the full *pneumatikos* existence when this natural body has been ‘sown’ in death, just as the Lord Jesus’ natural human body had been; crucified and buried in Joseph’s tomb, before He was raised in power. They have no choice but to follow in Christ’s pattern: the pattern of the spirituality of the cross here and now, the life of self-sacrificing love, leading through the experience of death to the glories of heaven and of the resurrection life.

The ‘natural body’ belongs to this world of material reality – time, space, and sense. It was created for life in that environment and is perfectly suited by the Creator for that role, so that there is nothing inferior or inadequate about it. But it is quite useless for the world to come. That environment needs a ‘spiritual body.’ This description does not refer to non-physical reality, as though the body were composed only of spirit. If that was the case, how could it be called a body? It has nothing to do with disembodied spirits existing in a shadowy after-world; but everything to do with a physical body existing in a different order, in the new heavens and the near earth. It is human personhood that passes through death to the resurrection and which, perfected into the likeness of Christ, will live forever in a perfect ‘spiritual’ body, recognizable in its continuity (as was the risen Jesus) and yet transformed in its newness.

Were this not the case the door would be opened to two serious theological errors, both of which have their modern advocates. One is that the body is not resurrected at all, so that the afterlife is merely a mystical mode of being. This is very close to the Greek idea of the immortality of the soul that Paul is rebutting in this chapter, as urged by the doubters of Corinth. A resurrected body, however, is the total *person* – mind, emotions, and appearance, not disembodied phantom. The other deeply insidious error, which is a related one, is that Christ Himself was not

1 Corinthians – Lesson 31

resurrected bodily, but only spiritually. In other words, He remained dead, but the disciples experienced an inward, mystical ‘resurrection’ experience.

2. Adam vs. Christ (15:45-49)

Not only will the resurrected body be superior at every point, it will be modeled after Christ’s resurrection body. Paul again reminds the Corinthians that there are two representative heads for human beings: Adam and Christ.

a) *The Options (15:45)*

⁴⁵*Thus it is written, “The first man Adam became a living being”; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit.*

Adam was the first man, and we received the physical, corruptible body after the pattern of his body. He was our physical prototype, not because he had in himself the power to give life, but simply because God constituted him at the physical head of the human race.

Adam and Eve originally were in a probationary period. Had they proved faithful rather than disobedient, their bodies would have been glorified and immortalized by eating the fruit of the tree of life, which they then could have eaten (see Gen. 2:9). Because they sinned, however, they were put out of the garden lest they eat of the tree of life and live forever in a state of sin (Gen. 3:22).

Christ is the other representative head. Paul doesn’t call Him the ‘second Adam’ because that implies there could be another. Instead, he calls Christ the ‘last Adam’ because there will never be another representative head for human beings. Adam’s was the prototype of our natural bodies, whereas Christ’s was the prototype of our spiritual bodies.

Quoting from Genesis 2:7, Paul reminds us implicitly that this was the result of a direct and decisive act of God, as He breathed into Adam’s nostrils the breath of life. In contrast, and by a similar decisive act of God, ‘the last Adam became a life-giving (*pneuma zōopoioun*) spirit.’ As the head of a new humanity, Jesus Christ not only has life but gives life (spiritual life) to the sons and daughters of Adam.

Paul says that Adam was created by God as ‘a living *soul*’ (*psyche zōsan*). We who are ‘a soulish’ body’ (because of the First Adam) will become ‘a spiritual body’ (because of the Second Adam), but according to the God-ordained sequence – *first* the ‘soulish,’ *then* the spiritual (v. 46).

b) *The Order (15:46)*

⁴⁶*But it is not the spiritual that is first but the natural, and then the spiritual.*

Paul stresses God’s order of events. The one leads to the other. The apprenticeship of cross-bearing is necessary as a preparation for glory. For Christians therefore to pretend to some sort of super-spirituality in this life, claiming that the natural body and the life we live in it do not matter, is to distort the divine order. The same error lies at the root of the pretense that we can have the full glories and triumphs of heaven here on earth, if only we can generate sufficient ‘faith.’ These are serious misunderstandings.

c) *The Origins (15:47-49)*

⁴⁷*The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven.* ⁴⁸*As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those*

1 Corinthians – Lesson 31

who are of heaven. ⁴⁹ *Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.*

The ‘First Adam’ and ‘Last Adam’ Paul now calls ‘the First *Man*’ and ‘the Second *Man*’ to align them with the sequence of ‘soulish’ and ‘spiritual’ of the previous verse. Adam, the First Man was ‘of dust’ (Gen. 2:7), like those who belong to him in this present age. He and we *are* dust, that is, what we *are* in essence. The Second Man, Christ, is, by contrast, ‘of heaven,’ a different essence, like those who belong to him in the coming age.

Just as every man who had ever lived has received his physical body after the pattern of Adam, so everyone who belongs to Christ will receive his new body after the pattern of Jesus’ resurrected body. ‘Bore’ means ‘to have worn’ or ‘to have carried about’ (*phoreō*). Just as the people of God have borne, or worn, ‘the image of the earthly’ – that is, they have resembled Adam – they will ‘bear also the image of the heavenly,’ that is, they will resemble Christ.

The origins of Adam and Christ are as different as the lives into which they lead their people. Adam, the ‘man of dust,’ is ‘from the earth,’ whose likeness we bear in our physical life in this world. Christ is ‘the man of heaven,’ through whom we share the eternal, spiritual life of His eternal kingdom. The theology of our identification with these two representative heads lies at the heart of the certainty that characterizes Paul’s words. There is no doubt that our earthly life, even at its best, is marked by our Adamic weakness, sin, impotence and failure. But just as certain is the assurance that we are going to be transformed into the likeness of Christ when we are raised to eternal life.

From Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances we get some idea of the greatness, power, and wonder of what our own resurrection bodies will be like. Jesus appeared and disappeared at will, reappearing again at another place far distant. He could go through walls or closed doors, and yet also could eat, drink, sit, talk, and be seen by those who He wanted to see Him. He was remarkably the same, yet even more remarkably different.

Just as with our Lord, our bodies, which are now perishable, dishonored, weak, and natural, will be raised into bodies that are imperishable, glorious, powerful, and spiritual. That which hindered our service and manifestation of God will now be the marvelous channel of fulfillment. We will have His own power in which to serve and praise Him, and His own glory by which to manifest and magnify Him.

The coming resurrection is the hope and motivation of the church and of all believers. Whatever happens to our present bodies—whether they are healthy or unhealthy, beautiful or plain, short-lived or long-lived, or whether they are indulged or tortured—they are not our permanent bodies, and we should not hold them too dearly. Our blessed hope and assurance is that these created natural bodies one day will be recreated as spiritual bodies. Although we have only a glimpse of what those new bodies will be like, it should be enough to know that ‘we shall be like Him.’

For next time: Read 1 Corinthians 15:50-58.