

# OUR RESURRECTION BODIES

*SERIES: PRACTICAL ISSUES IN THE CHURCH*

by Doug Goins

When Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday morning, he knew that he had come to die. But he also knew of the Old Testament promises that his life would be restored. The inevitability of the crucifixion and the hope of the resurrection are the sub-texts under the gospel narratives of the events and the teaching ministry of Jesus during Holy Week.

John Irving's novel *A Prayer for Owen Meany* captures the uneasy anticipation of this week. Johnny, the friend of Owen Meany, says,

I find that Holy Week is draining; no matter how many times I have lived through his crucifixion, my anxiety about his resurrection is undiminished; I am terrified that, this year, it won't happen that, that year, it didn't. Anyone can be sentimental about the Nativity; any fool can feel like a Christian at Christmas. But Easter is the main event; if you don't believe in the resurrection, you're not a believer. (1)

First Corinthians 15 focuses on "the main event" of Jesus' resurrection on Easter Sunday morning. We're going to look at verses 35-49, which focus specifically on what Jesus' resurrection body was like and what form our resurrection body will take. Paul is responding to questions that he has been asked by his brothers and sisters in Corinth. Verse 35:

**But someone will say, "How are the dead raised? And with what kind of body do they come?"**

There is some background to those two questions. Let me quickly summarize what we covered previously in this chapter (Discovery Papers [4536](#), [4537](#), [4538](#)). These Christians were struggling with the issue of what happens after you die. They were living about twenty years after the resurrection of Jesus Christ. As we were introduced to the chapter, we surveyed some of the religious culture that influenced their understanding of life and of death. Remember, Greek philosophy didn't believe in resurrection from the dead. We discovered that some of these Corinthian Christians were a lot more pagan in their thinking than they were Biblical. They were afraid of being disembodied spirits after death, because they hadn't embraced the Christian conviction that human beings will experience resurrection to eternal life. So Paul was speaking into their confusion about this issue. He emphasized three things.

First, he put the resurrection at the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our faith is grounded in the resurrection. He supported the fact of the resurrection with eyewitness testimony by a number of people he named who had seen the living, resurrected Christ.

Second, Paul emphasized the importance of Christ's bodily resurrection by surveying some of the terrible consequences that we would live with if Christ had not been raised from the dead.

Third, he focused on the certainty of Christ's bodily resurrection on that first Easter morning, and then went on to show the logical outcome, the fact that there will be a future resurrection of believers because Jesus was raised. Paul pointed to his own lifestyle and said, "Would I live this way if I wasn't convinced of the resurrection?"

Now this issue that has been raised about believers' being raised to eternal life has triggered the questions of verse 35. Eugene Peterson paraphrases verse 35 this way in *The Message*:

Some skeptic is sure to ask, 'Show me how resurrection works. Give me a diagram; draw me a picture. What does this 'resurrection body' look like?' (2)

## HOW RESURRECTION WORKS

Paul answers the first question of how our resurrection bodies will be raised in verses 36-41. The first image he gives us to help us understand how our bodies will be raised is that of planting a seed in the ground and of the plant that springs up from the seed. Let's read verses 36-38:

**You fool! That which you sow does not come to life unless it dies; and that which you sow, you do not sow the body which is to be, but a bare grain, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body just as He wished, and to each of the seeds a body of its own.**

The question, Paul says, very foolishly ignores the obvious examples of resurrection life all around us in the natural world. There is also something of an Old-Testament ring to his challenge, "You fool!" Remember, the fool in the Old Testament is the person who refuses to acknowledge God's presence and activity in the natural order of things and in the human sphere. That is the ultimate foolishness.

It says in verse 36 that death is a necessary part of the process of resurrection. When a seed is planted in the ground, it dies. It actually decomposes. It must cease to exist in its original form as a seed before it can come to life in its final form as a plant. Jesus applied the same figure to himself. The week of his arrest, trial, and crucifixion, he was teaching in the temple anticipating his death and resurrection. He said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains by itself alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). Before Jesus could bear the fruit of our salvation, he had to die. The point Paul makes here is that the same is true for us. We can't be raised until we've died. In a sense we're not really buried or cremated; the reality is that we are sown just as a seed is sown, and from that sowing new life will explode. This view is unique to Christianity among all the philosophies and religions of the world.

Verse 37 says that there will be a difference between the physical body and the resurrection body, the old form and the new form. The plant that emerges from the ground looks very different from the seed that was planted. You could never imagine what the plant was going to look like just by looking at the seed. In the same way, we can't look at our present physical bodies and have a sense of what our resurrection bodies are going to be like, because we're going to be transformed into something new and gloriously different at the resurrection.

But there is a continuity, and that's the point of verse 38: "...To each of the seeds a body of its own." The seed changes radically, but it does continue the same life form. A wheat seed doesn't turn into a barley plant, and a kernel of corn doesn't turn into flax. The identity of the seed continues into the full-grown plant. In Jesus' post-resurrection appearances in his resurrection body, none of his disciples and followers recognized him until he chose to reveal himself to them. But once he told them who he was, they did recognize him. They saw the wound in his side and the nail prints in his hands. They knew his face. The promise for us is that we will have some kind of continuity of our personhood, our personality, our unique individuality, after death.

So in answering this question of how we are raised after death in verses 36-38, Paul is asking us to believe that the God who has worked out this process daily through all of history in his creation of plant life can certainly do it with human beings.

## PERFECTLY SUITED FOR HEAVEN

In verses 39-41 Paul says that our resurrection bodies will be perfectly suited for the heavenly environment in which they are to function.

**All flesh is not the same flesh, but there is one flesh of men, and another flesh of beasts, and another flesh of birds, and another of fish. There are also heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one, and the glory of the earthly is another. There 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.**

Paul uses illustrations from the worlds of biology and astronomy and points to the tremendous variety in the animal kingdom and the infinite variety of sun and moon and stars. Each body, terrestrial or extraterrestrial, is perfectly matched to its intended environment.

I remember a Broadway musical in which there is a love song. The lady sings, "Fish gotta swim, and birds gotta fly, and I gotta love one man till I die." Each one uniquely fulfills the purpose for which it was created. Fish are created to swim in the seas, birds to fly, and human beings to know love relationships with other human beings. Fish don't fall in love. Fish swim in the ocean. And we are created to love another human being, but we are not created to flap our arms and fly around like a bird. The sun generates tremendous light and energy in our solar system. The moon is just a rock that reflects the light of the sun toward the earth. And all this variety and diversity in the worlds of biology and astronomy is a marvelous hint of the same diversity of resurrection glory in our heavenly bodies.

Again, if our human bodies are suited for this earthly environment, they won't be right for heaven. When we're raised to resurrection life, our bodies will be suited for eternity, and God himself will clothe us appropriately and perfectly. We won't have to worry about being overdressed or underdressed in eternity. That's a problem I always have as a pastor when I go to

wedding rehearsals. I always get it wrong. If I wear a suit and tie, everybody else is in casual clothes, and if I go casual, they'll be in suits and ties. I finally started just asking, "What should I wear to your rehearsal?" so I wouldn't be embarrassed about being inappropriately clothed.

But the good news is that I won't have that problem in heaven. Just as down here a polar bear always wears fur and a peacock always wears bright plumage, in eternity we'll always be appropriately clothed in radiant glory. That's the point of Philippians 3:20-21: "But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body." (NIV.) We'll be dressed like Jesus in heaven! What tremendous news.

## WHAT OUR RESURRECTION BODIES WILL BE LIKE

The second question Paul addresses is "With what kind of body do they come?" or "What kind of resurrection bodies will we have?" He responds to that in verses 42-49. Verses 42-44 tell us that we'll be wonderfully different from the way we are in our earthly existence. In these verses Paul applies the analogies from biology and astronomy that he used in verses 39-41.

**So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.**

Paul is now focusing more directly on our resurrection bodies, and through these four contrasts he mentions specific ways in which our glorified bodies will be different from our earthly bodies.

The first contrast says the perishable will be supplanted by the imperishable. That speaks of durability. As human beings, we are not very durable. From the moment we are born, the process of aging, deterioration, and eventual death has begun. And we know from the Scriptures that this is a tragic consequence of the fall. We are irreversibly mortal now. But the good news of the resurrection is that we'll be raised for good, as eternally alive as Jesus Christ himself. Our new bodies won't experience sickness or deterioration or death. And the quality of life that we will experience in heaven eternally is imperishable as well. The apostle Peter addresses that quality of life in 1 Peter 1:3-4: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you...."

The second contrast says the dishonorable will be supplanted by the glorious. This contrast addresses value or potential. We know that as sinful men and women we are dishonorable. At the fall our potential for pleasing, serving, and glorifying God was drastically reduced. Genesis tells us we were created in the image of God, designed to reflect his glory and perfection, created to honor him. But we know that sin is at work in us now. Even though we've been redeemed from the penalty of sin by Jesus Christ, we still struggle with fleshly patterns of sinful rebellion. Even the most faithful follower of Jesus Christ knows that his body, his intellect, his emotions, and his will are in a sense dishonorable or imperfect or incomplete. We live in a fallen, flawed world, and we reflect that fallenness. But we will one day be raised in glory, to use Paul's phrase. When we get to heaven we won't be sinful anymore.

That's the point in Philippians 3:21: "...The Lord Jesus Christ...will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body." We'll be just as glorious as Jesus Christ is in eternity. And all throughout eternity, our new, immortal bodies will be gloriously, honorably valuable. We'll be perfected for pleasing and praising our Lord. We'll be fully glorified so that we can enjoy the Creator who made us and the Redeemer who saved us.

The third contrast says the weak will be supplanted by the powerful. This has to do with our abilities. Our earthly bodies are temporary, weak and fragile. The older I get, the more I hear myself say, "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak." We all feel it happening. We're frustrated by our own limitations, whether they're physical, emotional, or spiritual. In 2 Corinthians 10-13 Paul reflects on how his entire experience is one of weakness, not just physically but in every area, and how he longs to be delivered from that weakness.

Our new resurrection bodies won't be like that. They'll be raised in power, and again, we'll be like Jesus. We're not told exactly what that's going to be like, but it will be incredible compared to what we live with right now. We'll experience no limitation of weakness. We'll be filled with power, and we'll be able to accomplish anything in eternity that God calls us to do. I hope you're clear that heaven is not about floating around on clouds and strumming harps. The Scriptures tell us that we're going to have work to do in eternity. It will be good, fulfilling, exciting, and challenging work. (See Matthew 19:28; Revelation 20:4.)

Finally, the fourth contrast says the natural will be supplanted by the spiritual. This contrast echoes the analogy from verses 39-41 because it focuses on the sphere of existence. This earthly body of mine is strictly natural. This physical world is the

only setting in which it can live and function. But my new resurrection body will be raised a spiritual body. Now, I do have a spirit within me that was given life by the Lord Jesus when I accepted him as my Savior and Lord. It now resides in an earthly body, which is tremendously limiting, but one day it will live in a spiritual body. Both spirit and body will be perfectly suited for heavenly living. In Matthew 22 Jesus said that we will be like the angels in heaven, and the human categories of getting married and not getting married will be irrelevant. It's not that we're going to be the same as angels, but we'll be like them in that they are perfectly suited for heavenly, spiritual, supernatural living.

## JESUS IS THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE

Paul further addresses this second question from verse 35, "What kind of resurrection bodies will we have?" in the last section of our passage, verses 45-49. He tells us that we will have bodies that are eternally alive, and that eternal life comes because we have responded to the Lord Jesus Christ and opened our hearts to him. Look at verse 45. He talks about the analogy between Adam and Christ, the first Adam and the last Adam, quoting from Genesis 2.

**So also it is written, "The first man, Adam, became a living soul." The last Adam became a life-giving spirit.**

Then in verses 46-48 he summarizes this order of physical creation and spiritual re-creation, new life in Christ, being spiritually reborn.

**However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural; then the spiritual. The first man is from the earth, earthy; the second man is from heaven. As is the earthy, so also are those who are earthy; and as is the heavenly, so also are those who are heavenly.**

The second man, the one from heaven, is the last Adam, Jesus. Those who are heavenly are people who have responded to him.

Then this wonderful, final conclusion in verse 49:

**And just as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly.**

Paul answers the question of what kind of resurrection bodies we will have with absolute certainty: We will have bodies that are eternally alive.

As Paul summarizes this, there are only two men who have ever lived in all of history. He has already mentioned the first Adam and the last Adam back in verses 21-22: "For since by a man [Adam] came death, by a man [Christ] also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive." So the first Adam is the head of the human race. By our physical birth, we are his sons and daughters. We all have natural or earthy bodies like Adam.

We were created from the dust of the earth and given the breath of life. And because of Adam's sinful rebellion against God, each one of us is born spiritually dead in our trespasses and sins.

But the good news is that God sent the last Adam, his son Jesus Christ. He came from heaven, not from the earth. Jesus was a man of the spirit, not a man of the earth. He came to give us eternal life, to make us people who are suited for eternity, for heaven-if we receive him, surrender to him, open our hearts and our lives to him. Remember the beautiful story in John's gospel of the friendship Jesus had with Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus. Lazarus died before Jesus could arrive at their home, and Martha and Mary were grieving. "Jesus said to her [Martha], 'Your brother shall rise again.' Martha said to Him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?'" (John 11:23-26.)

That must be the question for us: Do we believe Jesus is the resurrection and the life? Have you believed in this life-giving Jesus Christ? And as a result, are you a heavenly being instead of an earthly being? Having been born as a son or daughter of the first Adam, are you now a child of the King of heaven because you've accepted his forgiveness for your sin and surrendered your life to him? Have you accepted the eternal life that Jesus offers? And if you have, can you claim the promise of that last clause in verse 49, "We shall also bear the image of the heavenly"? We don't have to be afraid of what happens

after death. We'll be with the Lord forever in this incredible resurrection body that Paul has been describing in this passage.

About twenty years ago I found a wonderful little summary statement by Ben Haden, a Presbyterian pastor in Memphis, Tennessee. It pulls together this issue of the value of death and resurrection:

I was thinking about death. We hate death. We fear death. We'll do anything, pay anything, just to postpone death a few hours.

But suppose you couldn't die. Do you know what that would mean? The blind would remain blind...The paralyzed would never walk...The retarded child would never have a normal mind...The injustices of this world would continue to prevail...That which is crooked would remain crooked and never be straightened...The last would remain last...The first would remain first...The least would remain the least...Those terminally ill would remain ill but never terminate...And aching hearts would continue to ache and never be healed.

Suppose we couldn't die. Wouldn't that be horrible?

Inside, each of us yearns for a life not measured by years or by flesh. We yearn to have another crack at life, to do it over again but to do it so differently.

But wouldn't it be wonderful to die and not be dead? That's not some vague hope. That's the unchangeable promise of God.

There's never a man, woman, or child in whom the risen Jesus lives who can do any more than physically die. The real person-the real me...will survive without experiencing one moment of eternal death. Jesus' resurrection changes everything.

Jesus' resurrection changes lives. It changes our willingness to forgive...It changes our willingness to shift the blame to ourselves...It changes us into people of boldness who do not fold under cancer, or heart attack, or open-heart surgery, or anything else we can name.

Jesus said, 'I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die. "Do you believe this?"

## NOTES

1. John Irving, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, © 1989, Ballantine Books, New York, NY. P. 250-251.

2. Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message*, p. 365, © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group, Colorado Springs, CO.

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