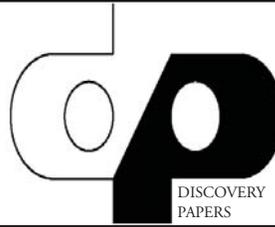


RAISED IN GLORY

SERIES: BODY. LIFE.



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1 Corinthians 15:35-58
5th Message
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It is common for believers to want to protect God from embarrassment, often because we don't want to be embarrassed by our association with him. Attention to God should inspire thoughts of towering ineffability. He should be admired and celebrated; spoken of with shouts and whispers. And a good religion should grant us status, make us enviable. Turning from mundane to noble thoughts should lift us to nobility. In this perspective, God is not embarrassed, nor are we.

Bodies, however, are embarrassing. Scalps itch, stomachs gurgle, and feet sweat. Time takes away strength and adds wrinkles. Yet truth must be embodied. Righteousness prevails only when we are persuaded to obey what God has declared, not just accumulate noble impulses.

And it turns out that the Creator is not concerned about bodily embarrassment. He is glorified by faith in action. He has no use for a sensitive religion made up only of clever metaphors and sweet language. God has chosen from the very beginning to be united to his creation. He breathed his breath into the dust to animate the first human life. He set his glory at the middle of a band of disheveled ex-slaves, wandering in the wilderness for forty years. God the Son was born in a stable and crucified on a cross. Jesus' body was buried in a rocky tomb and then raised to life anew. On Pentecost the Spirit descended to inhabit a crew of nobodies.

A religion that majors in passing emotion, ecstatic experience, and measurements of personal prestige cannot have Jesus Christ at its center. We serve Christ with practical, embodied obedience in this life and look forward to embodied obedience in the world to come. As resurrected Lord, Christ has determined that his followers will be raised with him to serve in a creation that also will be made new.

In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul makes clear that Jesus' disciples should anticipate resurrection bodies of their own. This is the final point of instruction in which the Greek word *soma* (translated: body) is used in this letter. This message will conclude our series which has focused on *soma* and its variety of meanings in 1 Corinthians.

1 Corinthians 15:12:

¹²But if it is preached that Christ has been

raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?

There was a faction in Corinth that had no use for resurrection. They loved religious language which stood apart from real-world bodily choices. They preferred the idea of Christ to the promise of meeting him, in person, on a day that is surely coming. In the first half of chapter 15 Paul insists on the historicity of Jesus' resurrection and proclaims that the entire Christian message hinges on this fact. The Lord is going to destroy his enemies and embrace his followers—events of future history which are not mere 'spiritual imagery.'

1 Corinthians 15:35:

³⁵But someone may ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?"

This is not an innocent question, it is intended rather to create awkwardness for the apostle.

1 Corinthians 15:36-41:

³⁶ How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. ³⁷When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. ³⁸But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body. ³⁹All flesh is not the same: Men have one kind of flesh; animals have another, birds another and fish another. ⁴⁰There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies; but the splendor of the heavenly bodies is one kind, and the splendor of the earthly bodies is another. ⁴¹The sun has one kind of splendor, the moon another and the stars another; and star differs from star in splendor.

The arguments Paul is countering here likely offer descriptions of decaying bodies, perhaps those who died from disfiguring injuries or wasting disease. 'Who would want to reanimate what has died and begun to rot,' they ask—possibly drawing first-century pictures of tattered zombies. A good religion must be more spiritual than this.

The apostle names them fools (v.36) because they have discounted divine creativity and power. God is not limited to making monsters from corpses in his promise of resurrection.

Paul uses the imagery of a seed. The plant which emerges from the ground is vastly different from the seed which was buried. They are related but appear greatly different as well. And the God who created the familiar world of seeds and plants knows how to create glory in resurrection.

But in using the seed imagery, Paul is making a very important point. We won't look exactly like we do now. Our appearance will be enhanced and glorious in ways we can't imagine. But our unique character and memories and gifts; our love of Christ and lives of service; our lasting personhood is the seed from which our glorified body is formed. In resurrection, we will be recognizable as ourselves.

We should also note the references to beauty in these verses—the stars, the moon, and the sun. Paul invites us to be inspired by creation. Look around at what God has made: fish and birds and plants, the glorious orbs of the heavens. The invitation to appreciate creation is particularly valuable in an age like ours that is so easily dazzled by money and machines.

John Stott died last year and almost every tribute written about his influence as a man of faith also mentioned his passion for bird-watching. Stott discovered God's life changing presence in both the written Word and the created world.

Gardeners and stargazers alike may discover beautiful vistas that sing of the Creator. Philosophical foolishness may be silenced when we look carefully at the beauty of God's creation. Paul's opponents in Corinth who scorned the notion of resurrection speak foolishly. When a believer dies a seed is planted and we await a marvelous outcome.

1 Corinthians 15:42-44:

⁴²So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; ⁴³it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; ⁴⁴it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.

A series of four striking contrasts tells of the end of death's power. The day is coming when nothing will be lost or taken away again. The perishable animal that I am now will be

raised with a body that cannot die, cannot fail, and need not be afraid. It's an extraordinary promise.

We live in a time when we observe viruses mutate and threaten our health. A gunman slaughters innocent moviegoers. Economic upheaval makes us insecure. We line up to be frisked at airports and worry about cyber attacks. Yet we have hope amidst insecurity. Vulnerability will come to an end; we will be raised imperishable.

The second phrase describes the change from dishonor to glory. Though we may be threatened by forces outside us, dishonor is usually the result of sinful choices we make. In weakness we follow the path of greed, prejudice, anger, and appetite and then lie or blame others for our choices. We act dishonorably and a guilty verdict is justified, but it won't prevail—we shall be raised in glory.

Perishable and dishonorable with no power to save ourselves, we are weaker than we want to admit. Our vulnerability makes us fearful. Fear causes shameful behavior which inclines us to more failure. But only for a time: sown in weakness we are raised in power.

Natural bodies are fit for this fallen world. A new world is coming and we look forward to a "spiritual body." This is not mystical language but the term for a body that is responsive to the Spirit of God, fit for service in the fully redeemed creation. Jesus is raised, and we will be, too.

To this point Paul has been engaged in debate with those who deny resurrection. But he intends to preach. Turning to verse 51 we discover that dispute gives way to passionate proclamation.

1 Corinthians 15:51-53:

⁵¹Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—⁵²in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. ⁵³For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.

God has made known a mystery, truth we could never discover without his revealing it. There are events bearing down on us, not yet arrived, but surely coming: a cataclysmic moment when everything changes forever. A lightning flash, a trumpet peal, an eruption of staggering proportions. The dead are raised and Jesus' disciples living then will be changed, clothed with immortality.

1 Corinthians 15:54-57:

⁵⁴When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

⁵⁵“Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?”

⁵⁶The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

The coming cataclysm brings an end to death. Hebrews 2:14-15 describes the devil’s power to tempt and ruin as rooted in our fear of death. That power is broken. The demise of death had been predicted by the prophets (Isaiah 25:7-8). It has been displayed in Jesus’ resurrection. We can be sure of the consummation—the end of death—and so live fearlessly now. Where is your sting, death? Where is the horror? Death has been swallowed up in victory.

Verse 56 adds a new observation. Death, sin, and law operate in a kind of terrible circle. The law makes us fail. Our failure raises our sin before us. Our sin makes us certain that we’re doomed to die. The law offers no hope for the doomed. This tragic dance is ended in resurrection.

1 Corinthians 15:58:

⁵⁸Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

Having preached on a great theme, what conclusions does the apostle draw? He doesn’t call for the writing of a symphony. He doesn’t say that we should look heavenward with our arms extended. He is actually much more practical. “Therefore, stand firm.” Don’t get pushed around. You know who you are. You know what’s important. You know the things that Jesus approves of. Do those. Labor faithfully. Give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord.

Galatians is another of Paul’s letters in which he rigorously engages false teaching. At the end of that letter he says this: “Let no one cause trouble for me because I bear on my body (*soma*) the marks of Jesus.” Faithfulness to Christ had left scars—he was branded by beatings as a servant of

Jesus. Serious obedience (standing firm, giving ourselves to the Lord’s work) is going to cost us something. We become sturdy persons-of-faith by following Christ wherever he leads. Each person who is shaped by faith will one day be clothed with a ‘spiritual body.’

Let me conclude by quoting the final paragraph of C. S. Lewis’s beloved *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

Peter, Edmund, and Lucy had been present in Narnia when that world was made new and death was swallowed up in victory. Returning to England they are killed in a train accident and Lewis beautifully describes, for them and us, the world to come in which life reigns.

It was the end for them in a sense. But for them, it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all of their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page. Now at last, they were beginning chapter one of the great story which no one on earth has read, which goes on forever, and in which every chapter is better than the one before.¹

NOTES

¹C.S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1950-1956).