



The Glory of the Resurrection

1 Corinthians 15:35-49

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We took a break last Sunday, but for the previous three weeks we were looking at the first half of First Corinthians 15. We've seen St. Paul defending the doctrine of the resurrection – not just the resurrection of Jesus, but mainly defending the idea that all those who are “in Christ” will also one day be raised from the dead. The Corinthians were denying that their bodies would be raised, and so Paul was stressing to them that if we are not raised, then everything is up for grabs. If there's no resurrection, then Jesus' death has no saving power, there is no forgiveness of sins, no means of restoration to God, and all of our preaching is in vain. Ultimately it makes fools of anyone who has ever trusted in Jesus as Saviour and Lord. As Paul said, “we are most to be pitied.”

But now in the second half of the chapter Paul specifically addresses their reason for rejecting the idea of their own bodily resurrection. Look with me at verse 35 of chapter 15. When Paul says, “but some will ask,” he's repeating their own question. They think Paul's crazy for thinking a human body can be raised from the dead.

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

They were saying, “It doesn't make sense. How can God resurrect a dead body? No, Paul, you're just crazy. It isn't going to happen.” But the Corinthians weren't the last to ask what really is for many a natural question. Consider the people who are cremated and have their ashes dispersed at sea or over some wilderness area that was a favourite of theirs. My old parish in Vancouver had a memorial garden behind the chancel. It was for the interment of ashes, but not in urns. They were sprinkled on the ground. Everybody was mixed together. How is God going to resurrect them? How will God resurrect those who were buried a thousand years ago and of whom there's nothing left – not even bones?

“How can it be?” is the question that gets asked whenever unbelief faces the resurrection of the dead. That's what the Corinthians were asking and the clear

answer to them was, “Well, obviously it's impossible.” It didn't make sense. But remember too that the Corinthians were mixing worldly philosophy with their faith. The Greeks at that time believed that the physical body was a prison – that it was basically evil and that the spirit was good. They believed that death was the great liberator of the spirit from the prison of the body. Why would you want to raise the body and put the spirit back into it? This was the idea poisoning the Corinthians Christians. Remember that they thought of themselves as the “spiritual people”. They'd attained to holiness and to God-likeness. They had received the Spirit and they knew it because they spoke in tongues. They had entered into the spiritual, “heavenly” existence promised in the Gospel. All that was left was for them to shed their bodies. They didn't really want an answer to the question of how a dead body could be resurrected because the whole notion of bodily resurrection just didn't fit their belief. But now Paul's telling them that the day *will* come when God will resurrect their bodies, and the Corinthians were saying, “No! We've worked so hard to become “spiritual”! We want to get rid of the body, not have it handed back to us by God.” They had denied the body in the present and had no use for it in the future. But Paul steps in and says, “No! As with Jesus, so with us. This corruptible body *must* put on incorruption – then and only then will the End come. Really, what's at stake here is the biblical doctrine of creation. According to Scripture, God created the material world and pronounced that it was good. But in the Fall it came under the curse. Paul's saying here that the material world, the material order, has to experience the effects of Christ's redemption and that that involves our physical bodies – it's not just our souls that Christ has redeemed. And so in verse 36 he responds. Even though it's the natural question for us to ask, he says:

You foolish person!

Now consider who the fool is in Scripture. In Psalms 14 and 53 we read that the fool is the one who says in his heart that there is no God. The fool is the man or the woman who lives life without a thought for God and as if God doesn't matter – as if today is all there is. And a fool is exactly what the person is who asks, “How can a decomposed body or scattered ashes be raised?” It can because with God all things are possible. And the person is foolish who asks, “Why would I want my body raised now that it's died and I'm pure spirit?”, because the person asking that forgets God's overall plan of redemption.

Now Paul addresses their objection on the first of two fronts:

You foolish person! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body that is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. (1 Corinthians 15:36-38)

He's saying, “You fool. The answer to your question is in your own hand!” Just look at the way God has arranged the natural order of plants. In a society where everybody interacted with farms and farming this should have been obvious.

First, death is a necessary part of the process. In God's way of doing things, death is the precondition of life – not in the sense that all must die, but in the sense we see in the seed itself: that out of death springs a new expression of life. They were looking at the death of the physical body as something that results only in rot and decay, but they were missing that death is only part of the process. They missed the more important part of it and that's that just like life comes from the dead seed, God makes life to spring again from our own death.

Now, second, Paul's illustration reminds us that there is both a difference and a continuity between our physical bodies and what they will be like after the resurrection. When you plant a seed, you don't get another seed. No, the seed is transformed into a green shoot that grows up and into a stalk. A few months ago there were acorns all over the ground outside the church. Put one of those acorns in the ground and you don't just get another acorn. No, you get a shoot that comes up and eventually, given the right conditions, turns into one of these huge Gary Oaks.

What you get is very different, but it's also the same. The genetic code of the acorn is the same as the genetic code of the oak tree. It's different but there's continuity. The Corinthians objected to the resurrection because they saw the physical body as a prison. They missed that after the resurrection our bodies will no longer be encumbered by sin and sickness.

A few years ago a non-Christian friend of mine was asked by his son what Easter was all about. He explained to his son that Easter is when Christians celebrate Jesus having been brought back to life and that they too will one day die and be brought back to life. His son had probably played too many video games and watched too many horror movies, but his response was,

“Ewww! Does that mean Jesus is a zombie and that all the Christians think they’re going to be zombies too someday?” But that’s sort of where the Corinthians were headed. God will raise our current bodies, but he won’t leave them the way they are (and he won’t leave them the way they’ll be after years mouldering in the grave either). Just as he transforms the acorn into something far more glorious, he’ll transform us too. He won’t leave us as we are. He won’t leave us in a state of sin or decay. And yet like the oak tree is still in some way the same as the acorn, we’ll still be the same as we are now.

But of course we’re not acorns or seeds of grain, so Paul faces their second question: “With what kind of body do they come?” Supposing there really is a resurrection, what kind of body do we come out with on the other side? He answers this question in the next ten verses, first going back to the lessons that we can see in nature; then showing a parallel with the resurrection; finally, in a great theological argument, he establishes the absolute certainty that this *is* going to happen. So first we see the lesson from nature in verses 39 to 41:

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

First Paul stresses continuity even though there are different kinds of flesh. There’s human flesh. There’s animal flesh. There’s bird flesh. There’s fish flesh. Even within those categories of animal, bird, and fish there are different species, each with its own flesh. God created life with amazing variety, but each flesh reproduces according to its own kind. Humans don’t produce birds and birds don’t produce humans. Paul’s taking us back to the creation. God created each species “after its own kind.” And there’s an application there for our resurrection. Back in Chapter 6 when he told them to flee sexual immorality, Paul had to offer them this same correction. To them the body didn’t matter, so you could do with it whatever you wanted. And he reminded them that there is continuity between the bodies we have now and our resurrection bodies that God will someday give us. The body you have today isn’t something to carelessly trash or to indulge in sin with.

God has great plans for our bodies, it’s just that they have to go through the transformation of resurrection. Just as God created each species to reproduce it’s own kind – a continuity from one generation to the next – so God will maintain this continuity between the body you have today and the body he will give you for eternity.

But even as he shows us the continuity – that we will have the same body – he also stresses that renewed and glorified nature of the new body. God isn’t going to raise a mouldering zombie from the grave nor is he going to simply give eternal life to the frail and sin-obsessed bodies we have now. He just described physical life here on earth: people, animals, bird, and fish. Now Paul points to the heavens: the sun, the moon, and the stars. Yes, there’s a certainly glory that God has attached to his earthly creations, but in contrast Paul points to the glory – to the radiance – of the sun, moon, and stars.

The ancients didn’t have all our modern technology, but even they understood the amazing nature of the heavenly bodies. Today we understand that the sun is basically a giant hydrogen bomb that provides infinitely more energy than we can even imagine. It’s what makes life on earth possible as we soak up its heat and light. Even the moon, as it reflects the light of the sun back to us exerts its own influence on the earth. I remember thinking about this one night when I was an undergraduate. Some friends and I had spent the day water skiing on the Snake River in eastern Washington. It was late by the time we’d had dinner around a campfire. We were at a small county park and overstayed the day-use hours. We were all laying on our backs on the grass and suddenly all the lights in the park went off. There’s not much to speak of in terms of civilisation in eastern Washington and it was pitch black on that moonless night. And yet as we lay there on the grass and our eyes adjusted they focused on the depth of space – on those millions upon millions of stars. One of my friends there pointed out that each of those stars was like our sun – in fact, most were probably even more powerful. Consider how bright those stars have to be to shine their light over so many light years so that it gets to us. There’s amazing God-given glory in the heavens. Now with that in mind Paul draws a parallel with the resurrection, comparing the earthy body to the heavenly one. Look at verse 42:

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

The bodies we have now are perishable. That’s exactly why the Corinthians were do disenchanted with them. We’re stained with sin and we’re bogged down by sickness and decay. But what they failed to realise, foolish people that they were, is the transformation that God will bring to our bodies on the last day. The seed is perishing, but what will be raised is imperishable. He puts it another way in verse 43:

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

He just used that word, *glory*, to describe the majesty of the heavenly bodies. Glory is the word that Paul uses in Philippians to describe Christ’s own resurrected body. Our earthly bodies are humble and lowly – in fact that’s a better translation than “dishonourable”. Jesus lowered himself when he became one of us, but now he has been raised to glory and one day will raise us to glory too.

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

Again, think of Jesus. When he came to earth, he came as a baby. He was weak and powerless. He depended on his mother to feed and clothe him, and yet after his resurrection, Christ ascended to heaven to rule over his kingdom with power and authority – and as Paul has already told us, he intends one day to raise us that we might rule with him – so that we will one day share in his power and authority. Today we’re fragile little specks roaming around on the surface of a little ball of dirt 150,000,000 km from the sun and yet one day we will be raised imperishable, with heavenly glory, and in power to rule the creation with our Creator. As he says in verse 44:

It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body.

That’s what the Corinthians were forgetting – and I suspect something we sometimes forget to – that God’s involved here. We’re not just talking about nature taking its course. We’re talking about God himself, for whom nothing is impossible, taking action to raise us from the natural (or physical) to the spiritual. There shouldn’t be any question about it. He goes on in verse 44:

If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.

It's like saying that day naturally follows night. And here's where Paul really knocks the Corinthians upside the head. Remember, they were the "spiritual people" – or so they thought. The idea of the present body being "natural" is something they would have agreed with, but to say that after the resurrection comes a *spiritual* body was totally nonsensical to them. That was the problem with their theology. They could only conceive of one kind of body and it was an evil, fallen, frail, death-ridden *natural* body. In fact, to them "natural" and "body" meant the same thing.

Paul uses these same words, *natural* and *spiritual*, in other places to describe the difference between unbelievers and believers. You see, when you and I became Christians the goal of our life changed. Before it was to do our own thing. Now it is to grow into the image of Christ. The Holy Spirit moves in and enables to be like Jesus – not perfectly, but consider that before we were indwelt by the Spirit the only thing we were interested in was what was opposite of Christ-likeness. The Spirit has given us a spiritual resurrection already. What we now await is a consummation or a making perfect of the resurrection. Right now our ability to be Christlike is imperfect. Right now we have "Spiritual" spirits, but "natural" bodies. They're mismatched. But at the resurrection God will renew our bodies so that our bodies and spirits will both be spiritual – will both be Christlike. Paul goes on in verses 45-49:

Thus it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first but the natural, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. 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 who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.

Paul reduces the human race to two men: Adam (the first Adam) and Jesus (the second or last Adam). Adam was created from the dust. Do you know what "Adam" means? It means "dirt". It would be like God creating him today from the dust and calling him "Dusty". His body was a "natural" body and because of his fall into sin, it became a body subject to death and decay. Every man of the race of Adam has been and still is subject to the decay and death of that natural body.

But Paul also describes Christ, the last Adam. He took on that natural body and at his resurrection received a spiritual and glorified body. All of us as followers of Adam are subject to death and decay, *but* for those of us who now also choose to follow Christ, we are given a hope for a future glorified spiritual body – through our new representative. All we have to do is follow him. And that's the flip-side of what Paul's saying here. We don't just hope to have a body like Jesus someday. Just as the first Adam has been our model for life, Jesus has now become a new model for a new life.

His point to the Corinthians was that they hadn't "made it" spiritually as they thought they had. They were lording their super-spirituality over him. And so Paul points out that while they do in fact have new life in them through the indwelling Holy Spirit, that life won't be fully consummated, they won't have fully "made it", until their bodies are resurrected – until they have a new spiritual body to go with that new Holy Spirit empowered spirit.

As Christians, you and I are living in a transitional state. We've been resurrected spiritually, but we continue to live on in bodies that have the same condition they've always had. And yet God intends that body for something greater just as he intends the grains of wheat or the acorn for something greater – to produce something better and more amazing. Death is a part of the process and it's the avenue by which the old body is sown like the seed to be transformed into something more glorious. The earthly is made heavenly.

Brothers and sisters, it means we have to ask ourselves: Are we of "heaven"? Having been born into Adam's race, have you gone on to also become part of the kingdom of heaven through faith in Jesus? Have you opened your heart to the Lord Jesus and received him into your human spirit so that you have the hope Paul describes here of becoming, in body and in soul, a man or woman as God intended man woman to be? That's the most important question any of us can ask. Are you "of heaven"? Again, St. Paul tells us the promise for those who belong to Christ:

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

Or as St. John puts it in his first epistle:

Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall

be like him, because we shall see him as he is. (1 John 3:2)

That is our hope and it's an amazing hope that transforms everything in life. It changes the way we act, the way we think. It changes our dreams and desires and aspirations. Everything changes. We will still be men and women of dust for a short time, but as heaven changes our hearts, we know that it will also one day change our bodies. It gives us an eternal perspective. The things of this life, this short earthly time of decay and death, become less and less important to us in the light of eternity shared with God. And as the Holy Spirit works in us, the priorities of God's kingdom, the priorities of his Body, the Church, and the physical and spiritual welfare of our brothers and sisters become more and more important to us. God doesn't just whisk us away to be with him in heaven in those new bodies. Imagine the shock a sinful man or woman would have if he or she were suddenly whisked into the holy presence of God at the moment of putting trust in Jesus. It would be unbelievable. No, God leaves us here that we might grow in Christ's likeness and be prepared for eternal fellowship with him. And he leaves us here that we might do the work of building his kingdom in the time left before he takes us home. It's for that reason we need to ask: Am I wasting the time I've been given? Does the prospect of spending eternity being in the presence of God and worshipping him scare me? Or worse, does it sound boring to me because there are things I'd rather be doing? Dear friends, that's exactly why God leaves us here and allows the Spirit to do his work in us. The question is whether or not we're bowing our wills to his work and letting him have priority in our lives.

We prayed earlier in the collect that our merciful Lord would so enlighten his Church with the gospel message that we might walk in the light of his truth and come at last to the light of eternal life. Father we pray that again. Turn our hearts fully toward you. Make our priorities, our desires, and our passions your priorities, your desires, and your passions that we might be prepared to stand on the last day in the light of your full glory, face to face, and give you glory and worship for all eternity. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.