

"The Resurrection of the Physical Body"

What happens when we die?

(Resurrection, death, eternal life)

I Cor 15:35-58

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The Oklahoma City bombing has affected almost all of us.

The stories that came out after the bombing about how normal their day began, struck us with how similar to our own day theirs was.

It was a typical work day morning - people got up early, scrambled to get ready for work, got the older kids off to school, carpooled to work, took the elevator to the fifth floor, greeted secretaries and other coworkers talking about the weather and sports - read some mail, went to the restroom, took a phone call and then with no warning at all - their world exploded.

In the shock and grief of the aftermath many spoke of life and death, of life after death and of heaven.

Someone hung a banner on a fence near the federal building that read "You're in a better place now".

A few days later the President of the United States and the Rev Billy Graham gathered with thousands to grieve the losses and encourage the living.

National coverage was given to Billy Graham's message of hope and heaven - a message of life after death.

As I watched and listened I couldn't help but wonder what the news reporters were thinking as they heard these messages over and over again.

Did any of them truly believe the dead are in a better place now or did everyone just know this was the way religious people psychologically cope with tragedy.

Do we choose to believe the unbelievable just to get us through the crisis?

Just a few days ago people in and near the Albertson's store at Kipling and Bowles were doing the most normal of things you can do - getting groceries, dropping off dry-cleaning, making a sales call, or just driving by.

Three others were just doing their everyday job - working at the deli, managing the store, and patrolling that quiet South Jefferson County suburban daytime neighborhood.

Suddenly in what must have seemed like a scene out of a television movie - three people died - shot down in a spray of bullets - not in a crime-ridden inner city neighborhood, not in some underworld warehouse in a drug deal gone bad, but in our neighborhood.

Jefferson County Sheriff's officer Mossbrucker was buried out of Riverside Baptist Church this past Thursday.

I didn't get to hear the funeral sermon but I suppose there was much talk about heaven and life after death.

Who believed it? Just a grieving widow and her young children?
Why did they believe it if they did? Just to have something to hang on to while they grieved?

Will that young widow and her children see her husband and their father again?

You saw the pictures on television of those who lost children in that Oklahoma City bombing - of those who lost husbands and wives and brothers and sisters.

Will those who remain ever see their loved ones again?

What do you believe about life after death?

Do you believe the dead will be resurrected - raised from the grave to live again?

When the Apostle Paul wrote his long letter to the church in Corinth, Greece he specifically addressed the issue of the resurrection.

Please open your Bible to I Corinthians 15

It seems there were people there, possibly even Christians, who didn't believe in the resurrection of the body.

Evidently there were people then, like today, who thought of the afterlife only in terms of the immaterial -

Yes, people live on but only in the memory of others or
they live on in the sense that they have influenced those around them, OR
they live on as part of the great cosmic collective consciousness.

In the first half of the 15th chapter Paul refutes such thinking.

He writes that as surely as Jesus rose from the grave so all who belong to him will rise from the dead.

Please look at Vv 3-4 of that 15th chapter with me:

Paul writes, here is the core of the good news I have preached:

READ Vv3-4

He then goes in Vv 5-8 to indicate all the people, most of whom were still alive even as he wrote of them, - people who had seen Jesus following his resurrection. In fact, Paul, writes, I too saw him.

Having stated what he knew to be the truth that Christ had indeed risen from the grave, Paul refutes those Christians who don't believe in a literal resurrection.

In Vv12-19 his argument goes something like this:

If you Christians don't believe in the resurrection of the dead you will destroy the very Christianity you say you believe in.

For if there is no resurrection of the dead then Jesus didn't rise from the dead either.

And if Jesus didn't rise from the dead then your whole Christian faith is worthless: READ Vv 17-18.

BUT V 20, Christ has indeed been raised from the dead

Look at V22-23 "For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn; Christ the first fruits (an agricultural metaphor meaning the first of many to follow) then when he comes, those who belong to him."

What has Paul concluded? He has concluded that of course there is a resurrection of the dead -

And he proves that is a reasonable expectation because we know Jesus rose from the dead and Jesus said he would raise those who belong to him.

In John 5 it is recorded how Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, a time is coming ... when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and ... all who are in their graves ...will come out - those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned."

The logic of the Christian faith regarding resurrection goes something like this:

Jesus said the dead would be resurrected.

Jesus rose from the dead.

Therefore what Jesus said can be trusted.

And so we can rationally believe, we can know, the dead will be resurrected.

Having established that there truly is a resurrection from the dead Paul turns his attention to the kind of body the resurrected person will have.

But before he does that, Paul makes it clear that this truth is not given just to satisfy idle curiosity about the future.

From Paul's point of view, whether you believe in the resurrection or not makes a great deal of difference right now in how you live.

For what you truly believe determines how you live.

Our High School students recently reenacted in a dramatic production a part of the life of Jim Elliott.

Jim Elliot was one of five young missionaries who died at the hands of the Auca Indians in the jungles of Ecuador nearly 40 years ago. The Aucas were known to be a very dangerous group of people but those young men had beliefs that from their point of view made their efforts worth it.

They believed that if the Aucas did not receive the good news about Jesus Christ they would spend eternity separated from God.

Furthermore those young men believed that even though it was dangerous, death itself was not too high a price to pay to get the message of Jesus to those people.

That's quite a perspective on life.

I was very young but I can still remember the "LIFE" magazine articles about the deaths of those young missionaries.

As I remember it, the dominant question asked repeatedly was "Why?" The sense was that this was a great waste of life.

That's a very different perspective.

Why such different perspectives?

Because their beliefs were very different.

Death for Jim Elliot was not the end.

He believed in the resurrection of the dead.

And it changed the way he lived.

It changed how he invested the life he had.

It affected every part of his life - his education, his choice of jobs, the use of his money, even his relationships.

What you believe determines the way you live.

The Apostle Paul said the same thing - I paraphrase Vv 30-32.

If you believe that at death its all over - that this life is all there is - then the old philosophy of "Eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" is exactly right.

But if there truly is a resurrection of the dead - if there is life after death, real life after death, then Paul wanted to invest in this life to insure and enjoy that life in the future.

This information about the resurrection of the dead is not given just to satisfy idle curiosity about the future - it affects the way we live NOW.

Let's look now at V 35.

Paul has established that the dead will be resurrected and he has emphasized the importance of that truth AND so now he addresses the question that most naturally comes to mind: READ 35

Does God somehow re-animate our dead bodies?

Are the molecules gathered from wherever they have been carried and then reassembled and given new life?

What does a resurrected person look like?

What will their body be like?

Will they be young or old?

Will the resurrected body be like this body?

If not how different?

What about deformities or imperfections or handicaps or anything else about ourselves that we don't like now?

If our bodies are immortal are they superhuman?

Will we recognize each other in resurrected bodies?

These are important questions.

What can that young Oklahoman Christian mother who saw her baby buried last week, expect in the future?

I don't know if Sheriff's officer Mossbrucker and his wife were Christians or not but if they were, what can that young wife expect in the future?

What about your loved ones who die -
for that matter, what about you!

To answer the questions of verse 35, "what will a resurrection body be like", Paul says you have your answer in your everyday experience of planting seeds - Vv 36-38

Look how God has arranged the natural order of plant life.

You put the seed into the ground but a whole plant grows.

You didn't put the whole plant into the ground but just a little seed.
It decomposed, but out of it came a whole new plant.

I don't get nearly as involved in the planting of the gardens at our house as Barbara does but I marvel with her each year at how miraculous life is.

If you've ever planted a carrot seed you know what I mean.
It is so small you can hardly pick it up.
It goes into moist soil and it decomposes.
But out of that comes a whole new plant.

The point is that kind of life that came out of the ground was the same as what went into the ground - carrot - but it was also radically different - it was transformed.

Look at the first part of V 42 READ.

What Paul is saying about seeds and plants is an analogy for the human body and its resurrection.

Now back to the analogy (V37)- when Paul makes a point about seeds and plants what point is Paul making about the resurrected body?

The human body that rises at the resurrection is the same body but yet is very different from the body that was buried.

If the Lord Jesus doesn't come before I die, my body will be buried.
The Bible here says that when Jesus does come my body will then be resurrected.
And it will be my body but it will be radically different.

"Well," you ask, "how will it be different?" "What will it be like?"

Before Paul answers that, he wants us to note something else about what God does with plants and people and animals and even the sun, moon and stars in Vv 38-41. (Don't read)

Paul writes that each kind of plant, or animal, or even the sun, moon or star, is adapted to its particular kind of existence.

God has uniquely created each thing that exists to be perfectly suited to its own place, uniquely suited to its environment.

Now what Paul has been saying implicitly through the analogies up to this point he now says explicitly beginning at V42: Look as I READ 42-45.

Paul in essence says, "I contrasted for you the wheat seed that you plant in the ground from the wheat plant that grows out of it - noting for you that what comes out of the ground (wheat) is the same as what went into the ground but also very different and uniquely suited to its new life.

Likewise your physical body that is raised from the grave will be the same body as was buried in the ground but it will also be radically different - and perfectly suited for the new life you will enjoy forever.

Our present bodies wouldn't make it in the life to come.

Our physical bodies at present are subject to aging, illness, and decay.

They are buried, Paul writes, in "dishonor" - there is nothing about them that is worth "writing home about" or being proud of - they are dying.

Our bodies are buried in weakness meaning that even before death our bodies are very limited in what they can do.

And, Paul writes, they are natural - they are suited to living in this world.

But in sharp contrast to our bodies now Paul says that when they are resurrected they will be "imperishable" - no longer aging, or subject to illness or decay.

That's right! our new physical bodies won't get old.

And the Bible says our new bodies will be things of glory - truly marvelous pieces of creation.

And they will be powerful, never tiring, never weary. Never again will we say "the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak".

And these new bodies, according to verse 44, will be uniquely suited, perfectly adapted, to live for eternity.

Let me make a special note here:

When Paul writes it is "sown" or buried a "natural body" and raised a "spiritual" body, he does not mean the body raised is not physical, immaterial (without matter)!

The point of this entire passage is to say that it is a material body - a body consisting of matter - but it is uniquely suited for the new life we will live for eternity - a spiritual life.

Well our resurrected bodies will be the same as the bodies we have now yet radically different - different in that they will be suited for the life to come.

But is there anything else Paul tells us about our resurrected bodies?

Yes, to help us understand more he compares and contrasts the body of Adam with the resurrected body of Christ.

What Paul is now going to do is show us that if we want to know what our resurrected bodies will be like all we need to do is look at the resurrected body of Jesus Christ.

Verse 49 summarizes this section so well: READ

When you are born into the human race you receive an earthly body.
And unfortunately that body is subject to decay, weakness, sickness, and finally death itself.

But when we are born into the family of God and are resurrected from the grave, we are granted a body like the one Jesus had after his resurrection - a body suited for eternal life.

On this same theme Paul wrote to the Philippians:

"The Lord Jesus Christ... will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body."

The Apostle John wrote (1 Jn 3:2) "Dear Friends, now we are children of God, and ...we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."

So what was Christ's resurrection body like?

First of all the N.T. writers make a big deal out of the fact that it was a physical fleshly body.

All the talk of the burial of the body, the guarding of the tomb, the empty tomb, and the hundreds of people who saw him and talked to him all combines to make the point that it was a literal physical body of flesh that Jesus had after his resurrection.

In Luke 24:36ff Jesus was seen by them, he was touched by them, he spoke of his flesh and bones, he ate with them - it was a real body!!

It is easy to conclude that like Jesus' physical body so our resurrected bodies will be recognizable as us, they will be physical not only to be seen but to touch and to take food.

Folks we are not talking about disembodied spirits communicating by some form of mental telepathy.

We are talking about literal, physical human bodies able to talk to each other, hold each other, and live together forever.

In V50, when Paul says, "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" he is not denying everything he has just written!

He is reiterating the major point he has been making - the point that a transformation must take place.

Our bodies, as they now exist (perishable etc), - are not adapted to the life to come and must be changed.

And with that in mind Paul turns now to the issue of when this resurrection will take place.

"Listen", Paul writes beginning in V51, "I tell you a mystery" - I am about to tell you something that was not known by the Old Testament believers - they believed in a resurrection but they didn't know some of the detail we now know. And what is that detail?

V51 We won't all die - but we will all be changed.

At the last trumpet - that is when Christ comes again, in an instant, those who are dead in Christ will be raised imperishable - changed.

And at the same time we too, who are still alive, will be instantly changed - our bodies transformed from these that are fitted for an earthly existence into bodies that are fitted for living with God forever.

Knowing the Apostle Paul as we do from his writings, I can imagine that at this point Paul is talking faster than his secretary can possibly keep up.

He is excited because he is talking about some of the most important things of life.

And so he emotionally explodes with Verses 54-55: READ

Here Paul taunts death!

Even though Paul is still in his mortal body that is subject to decay and death itself, he nonetheless taunts death because Paul has such a clear view of the future -

By faith he can see the risen Lord coming and death finally and fully destroyed.

And we can laugh at death -

Death does not hold the terror for us that it holds for a non-believer.

Yes we may fear the process of dying, but we do not fear death for it is a doorway into the presence of the Lord and because we know there will be a resurrection.

And not only is death defeated in the future but death is defeated in the present as well, because it no longer controls anything except this temporary physical body.

We know that death is not the end. We know that we will be resurrected.

We know that though our bodies die that is almost insignificant when compared to the larger issue of eternal life.

Death no longer has the power of fear to control us now -
We no longer hang on to this life as if it was all that mattered - because it is not all that matters -
we have a life that death cannot conquer and we have a physical life after the resurrection.

"Death has been swallowed up in victory."

And so Paul ends his teaching with a grand application:

"Therefore my dear brothers (and every woman in that church knew full well she was included in that relationship),..

Because you know these things to be true, STAND FIRM!

"Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain."

Don't let a fear of death warp your perspective on what is most important in life.-
Stand Firm!

Most of the people of this world live as if this present life is all there is.

Many, many Christians live that way as well.

They count this life as so precious they refuse to invest significantly in the life to come.

They'd sell their soul for a little more of what this world has to offer rather than believe what Jesus said, "What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?"

What about you?

Do you have such a firm belief in the Lord Jesus and in the resurrection that you are giving your life to what matters?

Paul wrote, "Give yourself fully to the work of the Lord"

Are you investing your time, your money and your energy based on an active belief in the Lord Jesus and the resurrection of the dead?

"Give yourself fully to the work of the Lord"

Are you willing to sacrifice the present - to give up the "American Dream" - in order to invest in the future?

"Know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain."

Do you understand that death is not the end for those who are trusting in Jesus Christ - and does that mean that although you grieve the loss of loved ones, you do not grieve as those who have no hope?

Stand firm. Then will come true that "Death has been swallowed up in victory."

I want you to hear these truths explained by a little child.

For a few years, about 20 years ago I audio taped my very young daughters answering questions about the Christian faith.

I want you to hear six year old Stephanie answering the question "what happens when you die?"

Q: What happens when a person dies?

A: They have to have a grave; they have to be buried. They don't like the bodies laying around or laying in the stores.

Q: What will happen when you die?

A: They'll bury me?

Q: Is that the end of Stephanie?

A: No!! You go up to heaven and get a new body. You won't ever die up there.

(From a 1975 audio tape)

While Stephanie didn't yet know the exact sequence of those events, she knew the essential truths.

Do you know those same truths?

Do you believe in the resurrection of the BODY?

The resurrected Jesus said those who belong to him will be raised from the dead to be with him forever.

Those who do not belong to him will be raised to eternal life separated from him and everyone else.

Do you belong to Jesus?

Have you responded to his offer of forgiveness and life?

Are you ready today to turn to him – to trust him?