

I Corinthians 15:35-58 I believe in the resurrection of the body

Introduction

What do you think happens to us after we die? Or what are you hoping will happen afterwards? Or if a friend or family member asked you this question- what response might you give? One day you and I will not be here, but in eternity. Are you prepared for that certainty? One day at either a crematorium or a cemetery someone on duty at a service will commit your earthly remains to be buried or cremated, but the Bible teaches very clearly that this is not the end. One of the forms of committal words I may use at a funeral service is as follows: 'Seeing that the earthly life of our sister /brother has come to an end we commit his/ her body to be buried / cremated, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, **confident of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ.**' This is the foundational Christian conviction that following in the footsteps of Jesus who died, was buried, who rose again and ascended into heaven, we too one day will join Him and those who have gone before us in God's new created world. It is not only a modern belief. Christians over the last two thousand years have held similar beliefs.

It is also a belief held by Jews over the centuries. Job the patriarch who lived in a similar time period to Abraham, a few thousand years ago, said a number of remarkable faith statements in the midst of his struggles to make sense of the suffering and loss he had experienced. These words included Job 19:25-27: *I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end He will stand on the earth.* ²⁶ *And after my skin has been destroyed, **yet in my flesh I will see God;*** ²⁷ *I myself will see Him with my own eyes – I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!* In simple terms, Job is declaring: 'I believe in the resurrection of the body!' Three thousand years ago King David in Israel wrote Psalm 16. In it, there are these remarkable prophetic words primarily about the Messiah, but also about those who put their trust in the Lord. In Psalm 16:9-11 it states: *Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; **my body also will rest secure,*** ¹⁰ *because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will you let your faithful one see decay.* ¹¹ *You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.* Death for David was not the final word. In the eighth century in Judea, the prophet Isaiah made this declaration. *But your dead will live, Lord, **their bodies will rise** – let those who dwell in the dust wake up and shout for joy – your dew is like the dew of the morning, **the earth will give birth to her dead*** (Isaiah 26:19). Moving forward a few hundred years we come to our final Old Testament voice, Daniel. What did this courageous and remarkable public servant in Babylon believe about life after death? In Daniel 12:2-3 he wrote: *Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth **will awake:** some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.* ³ *Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.*

The Christian Church in its consistent declarations concerning life after death is following in the footsteps of Old Testament believers who held the same conviction. The Apostles Creed which included these words: was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day He rose again; He ascended into heaven, He is seated at the right hand of the Father, and He will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, **the resurrection of the body**, and the life everlasting. Amen. The creeds or statements of faith in use in the Early Church or in later centuries were never intended to be exhaustive statements of theological convictions, rather as summaries of some essential foundational convictions. The reality of the **bodily** resurrection – that beyond this life we will gain a new perfect body that will be like Jesus' resurrection body is a gift from our life-giving God. Let us look briefly at Paul's words in I Corinthians 15:35-58 that seek to explain a little more of what this looks like for us.

1. An illustration of the resurrection of the body (I Corinthians 15:35-38)

³⁵ But someone will ask, 'How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?' ³⁶ How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. ³⁷ When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. ³⁸ But God gives it a body as He has determined, and to each kind of seed He gives its own body.

Then, two thousand years ago, just as strongly in some settings today, there are people who vehemently deny the possibility of bodily resurrection. 'When you die you are dead!' It is all over. In I Corinthians 15:32, Paul quotes this viewpoint: *Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die*. There were advocates of that approach to life who debated or argued with the apostle.

Even in this church in Corinth, there were people who claimed to be followers of Jesus but denied this truth. In I Corinthians 15:12-14 Paul sets out the importance of this matter: *But 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?* ¹³ *If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised.* ¹⁴ *And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.* It is impossible to know exactly what they believed, but the majority view in the Graeco-Roman world of two thousand years ago was of the immortality of the soul in which the person is finally freed from the limitations of a bodily existence to a better quality of life in eternity. To the people holding this world-view the Christian gospel did not appear on the surface to be the good news that they wanted to hear. Remember in Acts 17 on Mars Hill in Athens when Paul gave a talk to the Greek philosophers that gathered there, it was all going tolerably well until *Some of them asked, 'What is this babbler trying to say?'* Others remarked, *'He seems to be advocating foreign gods.'* They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and **the resurrection** (Acts 17:18b). Paul was, however, invited to speak more formally to them which again was going okay at first. When Paul came to his closing remarks, he said: *For he has set a day when He will judge the world with justice by the man He has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.* ³² *When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, 'We want to hear you again on this subject.'* ³³ *At that, Paul left the Council* (Acts 17:31-33). So how did Paul seek to get his point across to respond to these views?

He used a simple illustration from nature. We take bulbs and plant them. What we plant in the ground dies and ceases to exist in the form in which we planted it. However, because of that death a new beautiful flower can emerge and flourish in the months to come. Of course, in one sense it is exactly the same plant as before, but there is another sense in which it is different. In John 12:23-24 speaking of the significance of His own death on the cross Jesus said: Jesus replied, *The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.* ²⁴ *Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.* The seed or the bulb planted in the ground is transformed over time into something else. In the same way Jesus died, and then was raised from the dead with a new resurrection body. In some respect it was the same as He was recognisable by the disciples, but it was also a different body that was no longer limited by time, space or material objects (Luke 24:15-16, 31, 36-37). Our resurrection body will have continuity with our present bodies but also some discontinuity. They will be a significant upgrade on our present bodies and will not show signs of wear and tear after less than a century of use! We are embodied creatures. It is impossible for us to fully imagine life without a physical body. It is part of who we are as creatures created in the image of God, who was perfectly revealed to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

2. The form of the resurrection body (I Corinthians 15:39-42a)

³⁹ *Not all flesh is the same: people have one kind of flesh, animals have another, birds another and fish another.* ⁴⁰ *There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies; but the splendour of the heavenly bodies is one kind, and the splendour of the earthly bodies is another.* ⁴¹ *The sun has one kind of splendour, the moon another and the stars another; and star differs from star in splendour.* ⁴² *So will it be with the resurrection of the dead.*

Paul continues on the same theme in these verses. He turns to the world of nature and points out the incredible diversity of species on this planet. Had he known as much as we do on this subject it would only serve to reinforce the point he is making. We live in a world where physical bodies are the norm. They are a good thing not a burden to carry that we long to be released from. We may have difficulties grasping the views of that age with respect to seeing physical bodies in a bad light. By contrast, the Judaeo-Christian perspective from the Creation account in Genesis celebrates living in a world where we can experience its beauty by touch and taste, by smell, sight and hearing as do the other creatures with which we share our planet. Yet, particular senses are more or less prominent in the lives of other creatures compared with ourselves.

The apostle then looks up and draws our attention to the heavenly bodies visible in the sky and beyond. In this section of I Corinthians 15:36-41, Paul has in mind the days of creation in Genesis 1, from days three to six. In vs 36 to 38 he covers the seed bearing plants and trees – day 3 of creation (Genesis 1:11-13); v39a references human beings from Genesis 1:26-28; and v39b animals (Genesis 1:24-15), both from day 6 of creation, followed by a reference to the birds (Genesis 1:20b,21b) and the fish (Genesis 1:20a,21a), both from day 5 of creation; this section then in vs 40-41 draws attention to the heavenly bodies from day 4 of creation (Genesis 1:14-19). These the apostle identifies as the sun, the moon and the stars. His point here is that what they all have in common is physical matter. God's good creation has a physicality to it. The physical form of each is of course very different, but the possession not only of a physical body in this life but in eternity is a very good thing. We take that for granted and assume Paul is stating the obvious truth here. However, two thousand years ago he was considered decidedly odd as a thinker and public speaker in public square.

In God's new heavens and earth beyond this life this feature of our experience of the world will be retained. Our senses will be able to enjoy probably to an even greater degree the wonders of the natural world around us. It will be something to celebrate even more than at the present time. Jewish hearers of this message would believe that Paul was only stating the obvious points so familiar to people who had access to the Old Testament, but Gentiles in the wider community might have heard this perspective for the first time from early Christian preachers. It is fascinating in our own world to read articles by older journalists about the younger generation of 18-30s and their care for their bodies. I have noticed a number of them pointing to the greater attention younger adults are giving to what they eat or drink and the level of priority given to some form of physical exercise. From a Christian perspective, this development can be welcomed because good stewardship of our health and wellbeing can only be a good thing. Sometimes we need to have a review of our diet or our approach to exercise for the good of our health. It can sometimes help improve our quality of life.

3. The description of the resurrection body (I Corinthians 15:42b-44)

The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; ⁴³ it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; 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.

In this third section of the passage Paul returns to human beings and provides four distinctive characteristics of our resurrection bodies compared to our present ones.

(a) *The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable*; when we look at a beautiful little baby with their soft skin and lovely fine features, it is obvious how it contrasts with our older bodies and looks. It is part of the inevitable aging process! Some people can pay a lot of money for medical interventions to try and look younger but it is a losing battle! From our first days on earth the clock is ticking on the limited time we have here on earth. The author of Psalm 103:13b-16 wrote: *...the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him; ¹⁴ for He knows how we are formed, He remembers that we are dust. ¹⁵ The life of mortals is like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field; ¹⁶ the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more.* This body we have is to a degree like many of the goods we purchase in the shops. They do not last forever. The guarantees we may get with purchases have also diminished in extent. I remember reading of an early bicycle that had a fifty year manufacturers' guarantee. A vacuum clear I purchased many years ago had a twenty-five year guarantee of the majority of its parts, but twelve months is about as good as it gets with guarantees for purchases today. But the resurrection body is *imperishable*. It will not wear out. Hallelujah for that! I find that exciting! Recently at the football club where I am chaplain, I decided on a cold icy evening to participate in more of the warm up and running and sprinting programme. I did the first part ok and after opting out of the ball work, I rejoined them for the runs and sprints. It was a bad idea. I was fine to begin with but on one particular sprint I tweaked a hamstring and that was that. I had failed to acknowledge that I was up to three times the age of some of those young men and my body despite a good warm up was older and not able to do as much demanding exercise as I might have done in the past! But no problem for a resurrection body!

(b) *it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory*; the fall into sin of our first human ancestors led to a damaged environment and human sickness and ultimately death. Now we can respect and look after our bodies and they will serve us better over the longer term if we do that. In fact, it is honouring to our Creator to do that as well. He created this world in a perfect state and human beings are responsible that it did not continue that way. However, we thank God for the reset and His intervention into this world in the person of Jesus whose life death and bodily resurrection literally changed history. How does this relate to our future bodies? In his letter to the church in Philippi in Greece, Paul wrote: *But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ 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*** (Philippians 3:20-21). He repeated this point in the letter to the church at Rome. In Romans 6:5 he wrote: *For if we have been united with Him in a death like His, we will certainly also **be united with Him in a resurrection like His***. Is it something to look forward to?

(c) *...it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power*; it is not a compliment when someone calls us weak! This can be a physical weakness –how we are all acutely conscious at times at what our bodies can do or not do compared to the past. Now with regular exercise we can postpone some of the aging process but all we are doing is slowing it down, we cannot reverse it. When in robust health we can fight off all kinds of infections that enter our bodies, but when our immune system is low, we can be vulnerable to picking up any infection that appears to be

passing by. The fragility of our bodies can become all too apparent when we pick up injuries or live with health issues. How do we handle the ageing process? Is it something you are struggling with at the present time? In II Corinthians 12:7b-12 Paul wrote: *Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.*⁸ *Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.*⁹ *But He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'* *Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.*¹⁰ *That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.* This was an issue Paul struggled with for some time. But eventually he was able to overcome it. Is this an issue for you? Is it something that you might like someone to pray with you about after the service today? In 2 Corinthians 13:4, Paul wrote: *For to be sure, He [Jesus] was crucified in weakness, yet He lives by God's power. Likewise, we are weak in Him, yet by God's power we will live with him...* His strength in your weakness; have you experienced that enabling power in a time of need? Remember, the day will come when you and I will no longer repeat the words of Matthew 26:41: *Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.* These words, you may remember, come from Jesus to His disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, the night before His crucifixion.

(d) *...it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.* The body we now have will be appropriate for life in this world and the new one ideally suited to life in eternity. These terms 'natural' and 'spiritual' seem very different in meaning in our cultural context in recent centuries. However, the adjectives Paul uses here describe: not what something is composed of, but what it is animated by. It is the difference between speaking of a ship made of steel or wood on the one hand and a ship driven by steam or wind on the other. (N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, p.352) In respect of our lives in a resurrection body compared to our present experience, the apostle is declaring that to live in a resurrected body is to experience a new mode of existence, life directed and empowered by the Spirit, suitable to the age to come, in a body untainted by sin and death in any sense. (Roy Ciampa & Brian Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* p.817) This is exciting, but at one level raises more questions than it answers. No wonder Paul writes in I Corinthians 2:9: *What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived* – *the things God has prepared for those who love Him* – ¹⁰*these are the things God has revealed to us by His Spirit.* What a future we have to look forward to in eternity- in so many different ways – the reality of our resurrection bodies is only one small part of the whole of that blessing.

4. The glory of the resurrection body (I Corinthians 15:45-49)

⁴⁵*So it is written: 'The first man Adam became a living being'; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit.* ⁴⁶*The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual.* ⁴⁷*The first man was of the dust of the earth; the second man is of heaven.* ⁴⁸*As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the heavenly man, so also are those who are of heaven.* ⁴⁹*And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man.* The final part of this section is the contrast between the first and second Adam, the first human being Adam and Jesus the perfect man, the 'second Adam'. The first Adam failed to live in the way God had planned for him, but the second 'Adam' put right the failure of the first. In Romans 5:19, Paul wrote: *For just as through the disobedience of the one man [Adam] the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man [Jesus] the many will be made righteous.* The coming of Jesus changed everything. No wonder, the events of the first Easter Sunday morning were so revolutionary. Earlier in I Corinthians 15:20-22, Paul wrote: *But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.*²¹ *For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead*

comes also through a man.²² For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. This is our future because of Jesus. No wonder Paul is so excited in the closing words of this chapter

⁵⁰ I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. ⁵¹ Listen, I tell you a mystery: we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed – ⁵² in 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. ⁵³ For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. ⁵⁴ When 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?’ ⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ **But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.** The bodily resurrection of Jesus points forward to yours and mine as Christians too! To a believer who dies we say in effect- until that day when we met again. Praise God for that. So Paul, therefore, concludes in I Corinthians 15:58: *Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain. Amen*

Questions for Reflection:

1. What do you think happens to us after we die? If a friend or family member asked you this question- what response might you give?
2. What encourages or challenges you the most from this message: ‘I believe in the resurrection of the body’?

Song for Reflection: ‘Thine be the glory’

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RbBOOmKMLmI>