

THE NATURE OF THE BODILY RESURRECTION
1 Corinthians 15:35-49
July 9, 2006 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

One can read the following words on the tombstone of Benjamin Franklin:

*Like the covers of an old book,
the contents worn out,
stripped of its lettering
and gilding lies here
food for worms.*

*But the work shall not be
lost for it will appear
once more:*

*A new and more elegant
edition, revived and
corrected by the Author.*

Franklin understood in some limited way the reality of life after death, the reality that some at Corinth, as we have seen in 1 Corinthians 15, were skeptical. Having given the practical and moral implications of a bodily resurrection in vv. 29-34, Paul now anticipates the questions that these at Corinth might have, questions that flowed from their skepticism of a bodily resurrection rooted in the Greek thought of their day. You will remember that the Greeks considered the body to be evil and the spirit good. Any thought of the physical body being reunited with the spiritual for them was unthinkable.

Paul recognizes the questions the Corinthians' might ask and accepts the challenge. In v. 35 we read, **"But someone will say, 'How are the dead raised? And with what kind of body do they come?'"** In our text this morning, Paul answers both of these questions and shows that *the resurrection of the dead is possible because God initiates the resurrection and provides the body for the resurrection.*

I. "How are the dead raised?" (15:36-41)

Paul asserts that their skepticism was foolish, **"You fool!"** A fool does not recognize what is plainly seen by others. Or, if they do see it, they choose to deny it. Here Paul gives two examples that are evident to all but fools.

1. An example of life out of death (vv. 36-38)

Paul gives an example from the field of botany that would be easily recognized by these at Corinth, **"That which you sow does not come to life unless it dies."** Paul reminds them that the idea of life out of death should not be so surprising to them as they could see it all around them. Every plant they saw was a testimony that life could spring forth from that which is dead. Every plant was once a seed. When a seed is planted, under the right conditions of moisture, light, etc., the seed goes through the process of germination. The germination process causes the seed to decompose or disintegrate. The seed must die before it can give forth life in its final form as a plant.

Jesus applied this same illustration in John 12:23-25, “And Jesus answered them, saying, ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.’” This is a reference to His impending death that would bear the fruit of salvation for His followers. He then testifies the same of all who are able to participate in the fruit of His resurrection, “He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal.” Jesus says that before we can be saved, we too must die, die to self and to the world. This is a spiritual application of life out of death. Those who have died to self and the world and turned to Christ by faith have a new nature, raised to walk in newness of life, bearing the fruit of repentance and the fruit of service.

Paul says this is similar to what will happen to all believers who die before the Lord’s return. There will be life out of death and the plant demonstrates the possibility of this. But Paul not only attests to the *similarity* between life out of death in a plant and our resurrected bodies. He also notes the *difference* in the plant that springs forth from the seed in v. 37, “**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.**” There is a difference in the seed sown and the plant that springs forth a few weeks later. A grain of wheat provides wheat stalk. An acorn springs into a large, majestic oak tree. We will have lunch together in a few minutes and I am hoping to eat some homegrown green beans. Imagine how ridiculous it would be for me to desire to eat the green bean seeds and not the green beans themselves. We do not plant a seed in hopes of getting a new seed. We want the fruit. The body of the plant is different from the dead seed that produced it.

The same is true of our resurrection body. It will be different than the body that decays in the ground. Only after a dead seed matures into a healthy plant is it harvested. This too will be the result when Christ returns. There will be a harvest.

Matthew 9:37-38 – Then He said to His disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. ³⁸ Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest.”

Matthew 13:30, 39 – Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, “First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn... ³⁹ and the harvest is the end of the age.”

Matthew 21:34 – When the harvest time approached, he sent his slaves to the vine-growers to receive his produce.

But while the plant produced is much different than the seed that produces it, there is also continuity that exists between the seed and the plant. In v. 38 Paul writes, “**But God gives it a body just as He wished, and to each of the seeds a body of its own.**” The idea of continuity is that the seed can only bring forth its own kind. A grain of wheat cannot grow into an oak tree. An acorn cannot become an ear of corn. A mustard seed cannot become dolphin. And why is this? Because “**God gives it a body just as He wished.**” This principle of continuity was established according to the good pleasure of God at the time of the Creation. We read in Genesis 1:11-12, “Then God said, ‘Let the earth sprout vegetation: plants yielding seed, *and* fruit trees on the earth bearing fruit after their kind with seed in them’; and it was so. ¹² The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed after their kind, and trees bearing fruit with seed in them, after their kind; and God saw that it was good.” We see the same continuity as it relates to the creatures. Each body, whether plant or animal, could only produce after its kind.

Paul's point is clear: *just as God initiates the actions on a tiny seed to give it a body of its own kind, so too will He initiate the process of our resurrected body of life from death and decay.*

2. An example of various kinds of bodies (vv. 39-41)

First, Paul alludes to the various types of earthly bodies, “**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.**” Paul turns from grain and plants to the issue of the flesh. John MacArthur helps us to grasp the magnitude of this verse:

I have read that there are some six-hundred octodecillion different combinations of amino acids. An octodecillion is 10 to the 108th power, or 1 followed by 108 zeros. Amino acids are the building blocks of all life. Not only does each type of plant and body life have a distinct pattern of amino acids, but each individual plant, animal, and human being has its own unique grouping of them. No two flowers, snowflakes, seeds, blades of grass, or human beings—even identical twins—are exactly alike. Yet each is completely identified with its own species or kind. [*1 Corinthians*, 435]

God's way of creation is truly spectacular to consider. This combination of amino acids goes unanswered by the theory of evolution. The evolutionist has yet to be able to adequately answer two great concerns with their theory: 1) how being sprang forth from non-being and 2) why “evolution” occurs only within its own species or unique grouping. The Bible has the answer to both of these questions in God's creating man from the dust of the ground (being from non-being) and, as we have seen, His decree of continuity (bodies producing after their kind).

But Paul's concern is not the theory of evolution. In stating that “**All flesh is not the same flesh**” and showing the many varieties of bodies on this earth, Paul is suggesting that the glorified, resurrected body of the saint will be different than this earthly body. Paul ranks man highest in this list of creatures that he gives in descending order. Paul is setting up a question that the Corinthians must consider: “Is it not reasonable to assume that God, who created and fitted all of these different types of bodies on this earth, might not fit a body for heaven as He desires?”

He reinforces this by turning to the celestial bodies in vv. 40-41. Just as there exists a vast difference between bodies on this earth, the same is true in the heavenly realm; there are varieties of flesh on the earth, there are gradations of glory in the universe. God has fitted them according to His decree. Therefore, *no one should worry that the lack of an appropriate body will prevent the resurrection of believers.* God will fit the body according to His design for worshiping Him for all eternity. It will be a different body than that which is sown and it will be of a different flesh than we have on this earth.

So the answer to the question, “**How are the dead raised?**” is by the almighty power of God. If God causes life out of death in a plant, and if God fits each body on this earth according to His purpose, and if God gives glory to the luminaries, then are we inconsistent to think that He can do the same for our dead bodies? This is the glory of the resurrection! God can and will give us the body we need.

II. “And with what kind of body do they come?” (15:42-49)

Paul anticipates the Corinthians next question. Even if they were to consider his argument to this point, their next question would be obvious. “OK, Paul. Even if we believe that God will

fit our dead bodies and transform them into glorious beings, then what will this body look like?” Paul’s answer, “**So also is the resurrection of the dead.**” Here Paul elaborates on the fact that our resurrected bodies will be different than our present bodies.

1. By way of contrast (vv. 42-44)

Paul first shows how our resurrected bodies will be different by offering four sets of contrasts.

a. Perishable/imperishable (v. 42)

One universally recognized truth about our mortal bodies is that they are perishable or corruptible, subject to sickness, death and decay. The postmodern might try to argue against this universal truth based on his belief that there is no such thing as absolute truth but only things that we perceive to be true. However, the evidence is against them. No person in their right mind would deny that a dead man is dead. Nor can a person deny the process of aging that begins the moment one is born. One of the consequences of the Fall is that man became corruptible, subject to disease, death and decay.

Our resurrected bodies, on the other hand, will be imperishable or incorruptible. In the introduction of his first epistle, Peter reminds the Christians scattered about Asia, “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,⁴ to *obtain* an inheritance *which is imperishable and undefiled* and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you (1 Pet. 1:3-4). This being “**raised and imperishable body**” is a necessary requirement according to Paul, “For this perishable *must put on* the imperishable, and this mortal *must put on* immortality (v. 53). We will look at that more next week.

b. Dishonor/glory (v. 43a)

The first question of the catechism asks, “What is the chief end of man?” The answer: “The chief end of man is the glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” At the Fall man’s potential or capacity to fulfill this requirement was severely marred. Man was created in the image of God, with perfect knowledge, holiness, and righteousness. He was created with the liberty and ability to honor God in all things. At the Fall he lost the ability to honor God. The tragedy is that the first sin was an attempt to rob God of His glory. The affect of sin is evident in man’s repeated attempts of this vainglory. We no longer seek to honor God in all things but to bring glory to ourselves. That is the sinfulness of sin. Paul describes this affect of our sin nature in Romans 7:18-19, “For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good *is not*.¹⁹ For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want.” Death itself shows the dishonor that has become man because of his sinfulness. Many today adhere to the phrase, “Death with dignity.” But there is no dignity in death. It is a visible display of dishonor.

But at the resurrection, glory will once again be put on the body of the saint. The body will be “**raised in glory.**” These dead bodies that carried the scars of dishonor because of sin will be raised honorable bodies. As John MacArthur put it, “Throughout eternity our bodies will be honorable bodies, perfected for pleasing, praising, and enjoying the Creator who made them and the Redeemer who restored them” [*1 Corinthians*, 437]. These old bodies will be made perfectly fit to “glorify God and enjoy Him forever.”

c. Weakness/power (v. 43b)

We know that our bodies while alive are comparably weak and frail. But at death, when it is **“sown in weakness,”** it is completely powerless. As Charles Hodge said, “Nothing is more absolutely powerless than a corpse—it can do nothing and it can resist nothing. The weakness which belonged to it in life, is perfected in death” [*I Corinthians*, 347].

But it **“is raised in power.”** Not “with power,” though this is certainly true, as it will be raised by the power of God, but **“in power.”** We are not told what that power will entail, but we can be certain that it will be infinitely greater than that which any man apart from Christ has ever possessed. As Curtis Vaughan put it, “In this context, ‘power’ suggests that the resurrection body will possess faculties of which we now have no conception” [*I Corinthians*, 161]. May we take great joy in the words of Martin Luther, “As weak as it is now without all power and ability when it lies in the grave, just so strong will it eventually become when the time arrives, so that not a thing will be impossible for it if it has a mind for it, and it will be so light and agile that in an instant it can float here below on earth or above in heaven” [quoted by MacArthur, 437].

d. Natural/spiritual (v. 44)

The final contrast Paul gives is between the **“natural body”** and the **“spiritual body.”** **“Natural body”** refers to these earthly bodies, and **“spiritual body”** refers to the resurrected body. Some believe that Paul here speaks of a material body as the **“natural body”** and the immaterial as the **“spiritual body.”** One is a physical body and the other is of the spirit only. But there is no justification for this. Christ’s resurrected body continued to be physical and material, but this physicality had some special characteristics. For example, he was able to appear suddenly (Luke 24:36), even in rooms with locked doors (John 20:19,26), and to vanish quickly (Luke 24:31). At the same time he was able to break bread (Luke 24:30), to eat fish (Luke 24:42-43), and to cook and distribute food (John 21:9, 13) [see Richard Pratt, *I Corinthians*]. So Christ had a resurrected body that was able to walk through doors without opening them, while at the same time having the physical characteristics of his earthly body. In all likelihood, the term **“spiritual”** does not refer to immaterial, but to the Holy Spirit. The body of resurrected believers will be **“spiritual”** because the Holy Spirit will renew them and they will be totally Spirit-filled and completely Spirit-governed. Paul indicates this by his statement, **“If there is a natural body (one fitted for this earth), there is also a spiritual body”** (one fitted for heaven). He now expands on this by way of comparison between the first man, Adam, and the second Adam, Jesus Christ.

2. By way of comparison (vv. 45-49) (From Richard Pratt, *I Corinthians*)

The existence of a **natural** (ordinary) **body** necessitates the existence a **spiritual body** (renewed by the Holy Spirit). Paul supports this belief with five observations about Adam **“written”** in the Scriptures. From these five observations, Paul draws five conclusions about Christ. Assuming the truthfulness of his earlier comparison between Adam and Christ in 15:22, where he wrote, “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive,” Paul argues from the lesser to the greater. If something were true of Adam, then something greater would have to be true of Christ.

First, in v. 45, **“Adam became a living soul”** (Gen. 2:7). **“The last Adam”** (Christ), however, became something much greater: **“a life-giving spirit.”** In other words, wonderful a creature as Adam was, able to transmit life to his offspring, he hardly compared to Christ who gives eternal life to all those in him.

Second, the order of the biblical account was important. In v. 46, Paul says that **“the natural”** human body preceded **“the spiritual”** body given by Christ. This fact supports Paul’s earlier argument that God will provide a body renewed by the Spirit in the resurrection of believers.

Third, in v. 47 Paul says that Adam was **“from the earth, earthy,”** but Christ, **“the second man,”** is **“from heaven.”** Christ far exceeds Adam’s ordinary human glory because Christ came from heaven.

Fourth, in v. 48, **“those who are earthy”** (Adam’s descendants) are like **“the earthy”** (Adam). They inherit his natural physical nature. Yet, **“those who are heavenly”** (truly born from above, regenerate) are like the man who is **“heavenly”** (Christ), the one who is **“from heaven.”** **“From heaven”** refers neither to Christ’s location of origin nor to his current location, but rather to his nature. Believers inherit his spiritual nature.

Fifth, all men **“bear the image of the earthy.”** The Old Testament not only teaches that human beings are the image of God, but also that they are the images of their human ancestors, including Adam (Gen. 5:3). From this Paul concluded that all Christians **“bear the image of the heavenly.”** In Romans 8:29, Paul described the ultimate state of salvation as being “conformed to the image of His Son.” To **“bear the image”** of Christ is to reach the pinnacle of human existence. This is the pinnacle that Paul wants these at Corinth to understand and believe, and live their lives accordingly.

Conclusion

The Baptist Shorter Catechism:

Q. 38 – What benefits do believers receive from Christ’s death?

The souls of believers are, at their death, made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves until the resurrection.

Q. 40 – What benefits do believers receive from Christ at the resurrection?

At the resurrection, believers being raised up in glory, shall be openly acknowledged and acquitted in the day of judgment, and made perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God to all eternity.