

1 Cor. 15:35-49 - The Resurrection Body

Written by Tim Black

Sunday, 12 April 2009 02:00 - Last Updated Sunday, 19 April 2009 16:09

1.

Introduction

1.

Today a large number of the members and friends of our church are suffering more than ordinary physical difficulties, and so it is a providential blessing that today, Easter Sunday, we have opportunity to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ!

2.

It is in our bodies—in the bodies God has given us—and by means of our bodies, that we experience both great joy and great sorrow in this life. In God's plan of salvation, God has graciously chosen to save not only our souls, but our bodies as well, from sin and suffering, mortality and death. For this reason God the Son, the eternal second person of the Trinity, took on a human nature just like ours. He lived and died in a body just like ours. But unlike us, by the power of His divine life He rose from the dead. Why did Jesus rise from the dead? One great reason was to give us new bodies when He one day raises us from the dead, too. The final harvest of the souls—and bodies!—of God's people began in Christ's resurrection, because He was the "firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." (1 Cor. 15:20)

3.

The only one who knows the beginning and end of history today is God Himself. Similarly, only God fully understands your origin and your destiny. You cannot remember the day you were born, and cannot see what lies beyond the veil of death. So we are left with many questions about what will happen when we die.

1.

Christians know for certain their soul will immediately pass into glory, and their body will rest in the grave until the resurrection. Christians know they will be given a new body. But questions remain for us—"Will I still be me? In my body, with my personality, my memories? Will I still be able to recognize my friends and family? What will my new body be like? How old will I look? Will I still bear the scars of my sins and suffering from this life?" And in our pain we ask a different sort of question, "When will my suffering end?"

2.

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These questions flow from faith, but other questions flow from unbelief. Some will ask, Is there really life after death? Otherwise, we may as well "

Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die!

" (

1 Cor. 15:32

) And many people live that way today—"He who dies with the most toys wins." Some in the Corinthian church asked questions like this because they did not believe our bodies will be raised from the dead. They asked, How is it

possible

for the dead to be raised? By what

means

will they be raised? With what

kind

of body do they come?

3.

By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit Paul answered the questions of believers and unbelievers with the truth God has chosen to reveal. His answer doesn't answer every question we have. But it gives us a clear guide with the principles we need today, which build our faith, hope, joy, and endurance, as we await the resurrection of the dead.

4.

Outline. Today I will depart from my usual method of laying out the outline of the passage and seeking to explain and apply each part. Instead, I will quickly run through the outline of Paul's answer, then dive deep into the "

deep end

" of the passage in order to give you a solid foundation on which to stand when you face a hard question, or a great fear, about your death, and your resurrection.

5.

Body

1.

Outline. Paul gives you rich building blocks with which you can answer your difficult questions

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about the resurrection body.

1.

Hard questions. V. 35. First, in v. 35 he asks the hard questions some in Corinth were asking. Notice that Paul says "if you think these questions disprove the resurrection, you are a foolish person!"

2.

Answer. Vv. 36-49. Then Paul answers these questions in vv. 36-49, beginning with several illustrations.

1.

Illustrations. Vv. 36-41. First he compares the body to a seed. His introductory point in v. 36 is that the body will undergo a change, just like when a seed comes alive it changes into a plant. Vv. 37-39 say the seed's form is different from the form of the plant into which it grows. Vv. 40-41 say the seed has a limited glory, but the plant has a much greater glory!

2.

The Change. Vv. 42-49. Having illustrated the change our body will undergo, in vv. 42-49 Paul turns to speak directly about that change, saying "So it is with the resurrection of the dead." This change has two sides.

Discontinuity. Vv. 42-44a. On the one side, there is discontinuity—there are great differences between our present and future bodies. Paul states three sets of contrasts between the two bodies: "What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body."

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" Paul encourages you that even though your first body will die, your new body cannot perish! Even though your body suffers from dishonor at the end of your life—aches and pains, inconvenience and embarrassment, being ignored or even thrown away—you will be raised in honor

; in
glory

! Even though you are physically weak today, you will be made strong

by God's
power

on that day! This last contrast between a "

natural

" and "

spiritual

" body is the most difficult to understand. The word "

natural

" is

psuchikos

, "soulish." The contrast is not between the physical and spiritual, as if your resurrection body will not be physical in character, for this runs contrary to Christ's example when He ate fish after His resurrection to prove He had a physical body. Rather, the contrast is between

natural life

and

spiritual life

; the

natural life

God gave Adam when God breathed the breath of life into him and he became a "living soul," and the

spiritual life

of which God gives us the beginning now by the work of the Holy Spirit. It is the contrast between

creation

and

redemption

. You have a body that is good by virtue of

creation

, but one day you will have a body that is even better, by virtue of

redemption

. It is a contrast between this present creation and the new creation—your new body will take part in all the glories of the new creation, and it will be perfectly suited to live and dwell in all the joy, perfection, holiness, and even the Holy-Spirit-worked power of the new heavens and new earth! We have such good things to eagerly expect in the life to come!

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Continuity. Vv. 44b-49. So there are great differences between our bodies today and our resurrection bodies in glory. But vv. 44b-49 teach there are also similarities due to an underlying continuity.

- . In v. 44b, both are bodies
- . In v. 45, both are capable of life of different sorts. In v. 46, the second body depends on the first body coming first. In v. 47, each body is in covenant with God by being covenantally represented by a covenantal head. In vv. 48-49, each body bears the nature and image—the character—of its covenant representative. In this we see God's purposes in creation are fulfilled in redemption.

Deep Question. These are truly rich building blocks from which to answer our difficult questions. At the heart of many of our questions, and at the heart of this passage, is this deep question—is the resurrection body the same body as the one we have now?

1.

If it is not the same—if it is a completely new body, you have a license to immorality—"Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.

" This creation will be burned anyway, so it doesn't matter what we do with it. You may think this view is outlandish, but it's not far from touching you. A man with bad theology advocated this view several years back on the informal OPC email discussion list, and an OPC minister with very good theology has taught this as well. I tell you, the final result of this view—as Paul warns in this passage—is

a license to immorality

. Do you think you have that license? You don't. Paul says in v. 34, "Wake up from your drunken stupor...and do not go on sinning. For some have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame!

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"

2.

On the other hand, you could easily err in the other direction and believe the resurrection body is no different from your body today. The most straightforward result of this error is that you will have no desire for the resurrection body. If you don't recognize how much better the resurrection body will be, you won't want it, and you won't seek it. "Who cares if I go to heaven? It's no better than life on earth." Is this you? You don't have the hope of glory; all you have is apathy.

3.

If you don't believe in the resurrection, you will fall into apathy or immorality. I want you to be firmly grounded in God's truth so that when you suffer in your body today you will rejoice in that truth and be saved from the evil of immorality to holiness, and from apathy to hope.

4.

So then, what is the answer to the question? Is the resurrection body the same body as the one we have now? This passage has the answer, and now it's time to dive into the deep end. At this point I'll switch to using the New King James, because it provides a better translation of vv. 50-54.

DISCONTINUITY

On the one hand, 1 Cor. 15:42-44a emphasizes a contrast, and a discontinuity, between

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- 1) human bodies in the estate of the fall, and in the estate of salvation, prior to glorification, and
- 2) human bodies in the estate of glory.

I am assuming here the WCF's framework of the fourfold estate of man: man in the four estates of creation, fall, salvation, and glory. The contrast is between two sets of qualities, which we will summarize as "corruption" and "incorruption," since Paul summarizes them using those terms in 15:53. This emphasizes a fundamental DISCONTINUITY between the pre- and post-resurrection states.

CONTINUITY

On the other hand, 1 Cor. 15:44b-49 emphasizes a progress through a change, a 2-step process, beginning with

- 1) human bodies in the estate of creation, leading to
- 2) human bodies in the estate of glory.

Here Paul indicates a contrast between these two stages, but also a CONTINUITY from the first stage into the second stage. This continuity can be seen in two clear ways.

First, the continuity is evident in the if-then structure initiated in 44b. The mutually exclusive contrasts, the discontinuity, which structures 15:42-44a, is brought to a close by a new sentence structure initiated in 44b: "if" (or "since") there is a natural body, "so also" there is a spiritual body. The Greek construction is "ei"... "kai," which means "if"... "then so also." This construction does not appear in 15:42-44a, but because it is used in 15:44b, breaking the mutually exclusive contrasts found in vv. 42-44a, its if-then structure becomes the implicit structure of vv. 45-49. So, the human body in the estate of creation becomes the reason for, or cause of, the human body in the estate of glory. We may say from the meaning of this sentence structure at least that the created body has continuing results in the glorified body.

Second, 15:53 specifies precisely HOW this change spoken of in vv. 42-49 will occur. V. 50 says it cannot occur by corruption inheriting incorruption. No, there is an absolute discontinuity between actual corruption and incorruption. Vv. 42-44a have already taught this. And so it seems a great mystery how we can be changed, and Paul tells us about the fact of this mystery, and about its amazing character, in vv. 51-52. But in what specific WAY will this change occur? What things will change, and what things will remain the same? "How are the dead raised up? And with what body do they come?" (v. 35) These questions Paul now answers in v. 53--"This corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality."

"Corruptible" in v. 53 is not equivalent to "corruption" in vv. 42-44a. No, "corruptible" is POTENTIAL corruption, and "corruption" is ACTUAL corruption. ¹ (The difference is expressed

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in the Greek by "corruptible" being a substantive adjective, and "corruption" being a qualitative noun.) The "corruptible" quality of the human body at death is the same corruptible quality which Adam had before the fall as a "natural" man, "made of earth, of dust." He was SUBJECT TO the actual "corruption," "dishonor," and "weakness" into which Adam plunged in the estate of the fall. The actual corruption of men in the estate of the fall, as well as of men in the estate of salvation, remains evidence of the presence of the originally-created potential to be corrupted. The potential remains, albeit actualized. It is with this same "corruptible" quality, then, that we are buried in this life, and this same "corruptible" quality then is present at the moment of the resurrection, when "this corruptible must put on incorruption."

But this "corruptible" body will put on "incorruption." (v. 53) This actual "incorruption" is the opposite of actual "corruption," and thereby, it is the removal of the potential for any future actual "corruption." It is the removal of the prefall potential. Here there is real discontinuity. One actuality is replaced with another. But the term "corruptible" is an adjective, used substantively. This adjective is not speaking of a quality that exists apart from an object, but rather it is a quality that is true of the object as a whole. The substantive object which is "corruptible" is a "corruptible" BODY. This body will "put on" incorruption. That is to say, the same body that before the resurrection is properly characterized as "corruptible," will put on the quality of incorruption in the change accomplished in the resurrection. The body will be the same body, with a new quality . There's your answer!

The thought of v. 53 recalls the blessing and curse presented in the Garden: if Adam would eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, then God promised him, "in the day you eat of it, you will surely die." This means prefall Adam was "corruptible." But if Adam had eaten of the Tree of Life, he would "live forever." He would have put on "incorruption."

We may helpfully summarize the teaching of 1 Cor. 15:35-58, and relate it to v. 53, using the following chart:

Creation

Fall

Salvation

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Glory

a)

Corruption

CANNOT put on

Incorruption

b) Corruptible

WILL put on

Incorruption

a) is the DISCONTINUITY of 15:42-44a.

b) is the CONTINUITY of 15:44b-49.

There is BOTH continuity and discontinuity between the pre- and post-resurrection states, between the estate of salvation, and the estate of glory.

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CONTINUITY: The continuity is in regard to the **CREATED** character of man--man's construction as a bodily creature will not be utterly discarded in the resurrection; rather, man's originally-created body is the reason for and cause of the body that will be raised (vv. 44b-49), and even is the **SAME** body which is raised (v. 53). Actual "incorruption" will be **ADDED** to the originally-created body which has a potential for corruption--the body which is "corruptible."

DISCONTINUITY: The discontinuity is in regard to the **FALLEN** character of man--man's "corruption" which was put on in the fall will be utterly discarded; actual "incorruption" cannot merely be **ADDED** to actual "corruption." No, in order for actual incorruption to be present, actual corruption must be removed. It is the sting of death which is removed, and the sting of death is **SIN**. The sting of death, the "corruption" that is removed in the resurrection, is not the natural, earthly, dust, image-of-Adam character of man in the estate of creation.

Is not then the "corruptible" utterly **REPLACED** with "incorruption" in v. 53? Doesn't v. 53 still speak then of an absolute discontinuity? No, it does not; it continues to affirm a continuity. Here is why this is true: The removal of a potentiality can be its **ACTUALIZATION** (the created body which is "corruptible"--capable of the actual corruption of "you will surely die"--is also "glorifiable"--capable of being given the actual glory of "live forever;" the one body potentially could be actualized in either direction, so we may speak of this as one potential rather than two potentials) rather than the **REPLACEMENT** of that potentiality ("corruptible") with its opposite potentiality ("glorifiable.") That opposite potentiality ("glorifiable") was already present before the fall anyway, so cannot be the replacement for the "corruptibility." And in actual fact, the means of the removal of the potential ("corruptibility") is its actualization in actual glorification ("incorruption"), according to v. 53. The "corruptible" is not **REPLACED** but **ACTUALIZED**.

Thus the created body, both as a substantial entity, and in regard to its potential for corruption, is changed in only some of its qualities, but remains the same body (in terms of numerical identity), and likewise retains some of its qualities (in terms of specific identity). One of its qualities--a potential--is changed not by being replaced with its opposite, but by being actualized in a particular direction.

So WCF 32.2 is correct where it says, "...all the dead shall be raised up, with the self-same bodies, and none other (although with different qualities)...."

1.

Conclusion

Therefore our faith is not in vain, God's grace is not in vain, and our labor is not in vain, for in fact Christ has risen from the dead, the dead are raised, and we are no longer in our sins. Neither sin nor death will triumph over us in our bodies, but thanks be to God(!), for He gives us

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the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

In summary, I hope that in this each of us has begun to marvel at the great mystery of the change which He will accomplish in our resurrection, in our glorification. God says "Behold, I make all things new." The very same "all things" of this creation will pass through this change, be found on the other side of this change, and on that side will still exist, and only thereby be called "new." This spells a real, and fundamental CONTINUITY. Yet at the same time, there will not be one thing that is not truly called "new." All things will be made new. This spells a real, and fundamental DISCONTINUITY. We fail to glorify God as the glorifying God if we allow either this continuity, or this discontinuity, to win the upper hand. What a deep, marvelous, and glorious mystery! We may only bow before Him in profound humility, and awe. Let our hearts rejoice without any hesitation, and believe Him for all that He says, when we hear our glorious God say, "Behold, I make all things new."

Have you carefully considered 1 Cor. 15:53? Does it not teach a fundamental, bodily continuity between our pre- and post-resurrection bodies? If our self-same bodies are not raised, then is not our faith in vain? Does it not also teach that our body will be raised with radically new qualities, which we ought to desire and seek with all our might? Because it teaches these things, Paul concludes with a final exhortation calculated to protect you from both apathy and immorality—"Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain. "

Armed with the encouragements of this passage, how do you answer the difficult questions about your resurrection body? "Will I still be me? In my body, with my personality, my memories? Will I still be able to recognize my friends and family? What will my new body be like? How old will I look? Will I still bear the scars of my sins and suffering from this life?" And in our pain we ask a different sort of question, "When will my suffering end?" We don't have every answer, but we have the solid assurance that we will have the self-same body, made new, imperishable, in glory, power, and eternal life. Give praise to the Lord for the resurrection body that will be yours through the resurrection of Jesus Christ!

1 Please forgive my Aristotelian-sounding act-potency language; I'm using it because it is warranted by the grammar and syntax of the passage, and because it is used by the WCF to speak about this same issue.