

“In the Twinkling of an Eye”

The Thirty-First in a Series of Sermons on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

Texts: 1 Corinthians: 15:35-58; Isaiah 25:1-12

We have all thought about it. We talk about having eternal life, but what does that *really* mean? How will we spend eternity? What, exactly, will happen to us on that day the Lord returns to judge the world, raise the dead and make all things new. What will our resurrection body be like? In 1 Corinthians 15:35-58, Paul tells us.

We are nearing the end our series on 1 Corinthians and we have been making our way through one of the richest chapters in all the Bible in terms of doctrinal content—chapter fifteen of that letter. In this chapter Paul defines the gospel (vv. 1-11), discusses the fact of the resurrection (vv. 12-19), points out how that resurrection is tied to Christ’s return at the end of the age (vv. 20-28), and reminds us that Jesus’ resurrection establishes Christian ethics (29-34). Paul closes out his discussion of Christ’s resurrection and its importance for us by discussing the nature of that body in which we will be raised at the end of the age. The very idea of a bodily resurrection presented a problem for first century Greeks who believed that the body was the source of urges and passions from which people finally escape at death. Paul must correct this false assumption by making a compelling case that God will indeed raise the dead, bodily.

Since we have a great deal of ground to cover, we take up Paul discussion of the resurrection body beginning in verse 35, of 1 Corinthians 15. Paul opens this section by asking a question, and then answers it using a number of analogies, beginning with that of seeds and bodies. “*But someone will ask, ‘How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?’*” The question is either rhetorical (Paul asks the question that a hypothetical person might ask in light of his previous discussion about the resurrection of the body) or else the question actually comes from the letter sent by the Corinthians to Paul. We don’t really know which. But the question is very simple.¹ “How are the dead raised?” “What will the resurrected body be like?”

Not only would the Greek mind have trouble with the physical body being raised in the first place, but once the body decomposes, how can it be raised? What on earth would such a body be like? How can God reanimate a dead and decaying body? There may be a bit of Greek skepticism in the question. But as we see in verse 36, Paul will have none of such skepticism! “*You foolish person! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.*” Paul actually labels those raising such an objection “foolish,”² a reference to someone who has not truly considered God’s perspective on this subject.³

As we have seen throughout our series, Paul uses irony to make a point since the Greeks considered themselves to be wise, while the cross remained foolishness to them. The reason such a question was foolish is because there are many well-known analogies which illustrate the very thing Greeks did not consider to be possible (a bodily resurrection). Paul offers a number of these analogies in his response.

¹ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 219.

² Morris, 1 Corinthians, 219.

³ Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 780.

In the first century people were very familiar with the process of planting and harvesting—their very lives depended upon it. Those who sowed seed, buried that seed in the process of planting. When the seed was buried, its present existence as a seed was destroyed. Even Jesus speaks of the sown seed as dying (cf. John 12:24—“*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*”). New life (the plant which comes forth from the seed) cannot come about unless and until the seed dies (germinates). Why, then, should people be surprised by the thought of the human body being raised in a similar manner? As Paul states in verse 37, “*And what you sow is not the body that is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain.*” A seed is not very spectacular. The seed (whether it be wheat, flax or anything else) is small (in comparison to what it produces), and for all intents and purposes looks to be dead before it is planted.

But when the seed is “sowed” (buried), it becomes a living plant, which flowers and then produces more seed. While there is identity between the two (the wheat seed produces a stalk of wheat, not a head of corn!), there is also a marked difference between the glory of what is sown (buried) and what comes forth from the ground. The one (the seed) pails in contrast to the other (the plant). As Paul goes on to point out in verse 38, “*But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body.*” Paul envisions God as sovereign over this process. God gives everything (even seeds and plants) their form and purpose, and therefore their meaning. God gives us seeds and determines what these seeds will become upon germination. Obviously, Paul is laying the groundwork for a point he will make later on.

In verse 39, Paul now moves from seeds and plants to the flesh of humans animals. “*For not all flesh is the same, but there is one kind for humans, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish.*” Obviously, not all kinds of flesh are the same. Animals have one kind of flesh, birds have another, and fish yet another. The same is true of human flesh—it is not the same as that of animals.

Next, Paul draws a contrast between heavenly and earthly bodies. “*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.*” Although we use the term “heavenly bodies” in reference to stars, that is probably not Paul’s point here (since he specifically refers to stars and planets in the next verse). The contrast he sets up is between earthly bodies (not the earth) and heavenly bodies (not stars).⁴ Paul is arguing that earthly beings have earthly bodies (appropriate to their earthly existence), while heavenly beings, have heavenly bodies (appropriate to their heavenly existence). Since this is case, the splendor of each is of a different order because earthly and heavenly bodies are different. But in verse 41, the Apostle does contrast the splendor between the moon and the stars. “*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.*” The moon and the stars each manifest a particular and therefore, unique kind of splendor, specifically connected to their form and function.

Paul’s point in listing these items (plants, animals, earthly and heavenly bodies, the moon and stars—along with the human body) is that God creates all things and then gives each of them a uniqueness (and therefore a particular splendor) appropriate to its divinely-given purpose. This sets the stage for the conclusion Paul reaches in verse 42. “*So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable.*”

It is against the backdrop of the fact of different kinds of bodies with different degrees of splendor that we should understand what is said here—“so it will be with the resurrection of the dead.” The human

⁴ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 220.

body is sown (buried) as perishable (corruptible). This perishable condition (death) is the consequences of human sin. But the body which is perishable will be raised imperishable—that is, a wonderful transformation takes place. This transformation is the very heart of the doctrine of the resurrection.

Again, we find both ideas of identity and differentiation. Although, gloriously transformed, the body which is raised is a still human body (and just as in the case of our Lord), our own body. But it is raised with a new glory so that it is now incorruptible and, therefore, no longer subject to decay, as it had been before. This would have been an important point to make with Greeks, who felt the decay of the body at death was the reason why a bodily resurrection was thought impossible, and why the focus of Greek thinking about death focused upon the soul, especially in the sense that death liberates the incorruptible soul from a corruptible body. Paul acknowledges the point that people die because of the corruptibility of human flesh. It is the present body which is subject to decay. The Christian hope is that this corruptible body will be raised with a new splendor and will be utterly transformed so that it will become incorruptible. The hope of the afterlife is not disembodied existence, but the resurrection of our bodies.

In verse 43, Paul continues to chip away at Greek resistance to a bodily resurrection. *“It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power.”* Our body is sown (buried) in dishonor because of human sin. The word “dishonor” often refers to the loss of citizenship (and those rights that go with it). A corpse has no rights!⁵ Furthermore, the Jews regarded the dead body as unclean (Numbers 19:11). In a world which knows not refrigeration nor mortuary science, a dead body immediately decomposes, smells, harbors disease, and is hardly something to be honored. This is why Paul says that our present bodies have been sown in weakness—a weakness which is manifest through the limitations of bodily existence, sickness, and by decay at death.

Notice the contrast Paul sets out—that same dishonored and weak body will be raised in such a way that its glory will far surpass the corruption of present human existence. Just as the seed produces a plant of much greater glory than the seed, so too, the same will be true of the resurrection body. Just as our current bodies are weak and corrupt, the resurrection body will know no such weaknesses or limitations, because that body will be incorruptible and no longer subject to decay, because the consequences of sin have been overturned. As Paul puts it in verse 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.”*

The natural body (*pyschikon*) is part of the natural world. Such a body is not appropriate for the glories of the age to come.⁶ When the natural body is buried at death, it will be raised as a spiritual body (a *pneumatikos* body), a body, which, while material (in identification with the body that was sown), is transformed so as to be a body suited to the glories of the age to come.⁷ A spiritual body does not mean an “immaterial” body, or a foreign body, but our own resurrected body which now bears the likeness of Christ’s resurrected body (v. 49). The contrast is between that body which is appropriate to earthly existence (corruptible) and a body which is appropriate to a heavenly existence (incorruptible).

Having already mentioned in verses 21-22 of this chapter that in Adam all die, while in Christ all those

⁵ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 222.

⁶ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 223.

⁷ Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 786.

who are his will be made alive, Paul returns to the account of the creation of Adam from Genesis 2:7 to support the analogy he has just made in verse 44—believers will be raised with a spiritual body which is incorruptible, exactly like that of Jesus Christ in his resurrection. Throughout this section (vv. 45-49), Paul’s Adam-Christ analogy is the basis for understanding creation, fall, and redemption (resurrection). Paul is spelling out the difference between being “sown” in corruption and being “raised incorruptible.”

In verse 45, Paul writes, “*Thus it is written, “The first man Adam became a living being”; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit.*” Loosely paraphrasing from Genesis 2:7, Paul inserts “first” before “man,” and “Adam” after “man.” Paul’s point is that man was created as a “living being,” with a body and a soul (*psyche*). This was not only true for Adam, it is true for all of his descendants.⁸ What is characteristic of Adam, is characteristic of the entire human race. It is an existence thoroughly appropriate for earthly life. But because of human sin, corruption is the characteristic of this present evil age. At present, we are not *pneumatikos* (spiritual), even though we are already indwelt by God’s Spirit. It will take the resurrection of our bodies for such transformation to the *pneumatikos* (spiritual) to take place.

Paul adds to the Genesis quotation his own assertion that Jesus Christ is likewise the head of another category of people (all those raised “in Christ”). Notice that Paul speaks of the “last Adam,” not the “second” Adam—to indicate the contrast between the two key figures in redemptive history, Adam and Christ. Just as the characteristics of Adam are typical of his descendants (corruption), so too, Jesus Christ also stands at the head of a new category (the last), which has been redeemed and restored via regeneration and resurrection (to be raised incorruptible). Because Jesus is the last Adam, all of his glorious characteristics are “stamped” upon all those who are his.⁹

This is true because Christ is said to be a “life-giving” spirit. There is a huge debate about what Paul means by this and when Jesus became such a life-giving spirit—through the incarnation, the resurrection and ascension, second advent, etc. But that debate misses the main point, which is really quite simple—Jesus is not only the pattern of the redeemed (the archetype), he is also the source of that transforming power which raises us from corruption to incorruption.¹⁰ The dead are raised “in Christ.”

In verse 46, Paul reminds us there is a divine order to things. “*But it is not the spiritual that is first but the natural, and then the spiritual.*” Redemptive history gives us the key to understand the way in which these things will occur. In the creation account (just mentioned by Paul) the natural order of things came first (Adam). Only after the coming of Jesus Christ and his triumphant resurrection from the dead does the (*pneumatikos*) spiritual become the order of things (i.e. in the new creation). As men and women who descend from Adam, we enter natural life first. It is only after Christ has accomplished his redemptive work in the resurrection that men and women can enter into the spiritual existence in resurrected bodies, which is not fully realized until the bodily resurrection at the end of the age.

Paul may be refuting a notion widely held by Jews, which came through the philosopher Philo, to the

⁸ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 223.

⁹ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 223.

¹⁰ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 224.

effect that God created a heavenly man first and only later created a natural (or earthly man).¹¹ No, the opposite is the case. The natural precedes the heavenly. But Paul also may be correcting an over-realized eschatology held among the Corinthians (preterism), which erroneously assumed that Christians have already entered into the fullness of the *pneumatikos* when they were converted.¹² Since Christians are presently indwelt by the Holy Spirit, Christians have provisionally entered that state. But the *pneumatikos* is not fully realized until the resurrection at the end of the age, when our bodies are raised after the pattern of our Lord's body. Therefore, even though we have already been raised with Christ (and are seated with him in the heavenlies), the bodily resurrection is "not yet."

In this, the contrast between Christ and Adam could not be greater. "*The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven.*" Paul continues to explain the *pneumatikos* in relation to the creation account. The first man is Adam, who was created from the dust of the earth. Paul affirms both the historicity of the Genesis account as well as the biological unity of the race. But the second man (Jesus Christ) stands in contrast to the first man. Jesus Christ represents the heavenly order (i.e. that of the age to come). Jesus represents a different category of life (heavenly), which must be understood in the sense of transformed earthly life.¹³ Though Jesus took to himself a true human nature (and therefore fully identified himself with Adam's fallen race so as to redeem us from the guilt and power of sin), Jesus' origin is heavenly (through power of the Holy Spirit), in contrast to Adam, who is of the dust.

We need not read more into Paul's language here (no, he's not really addressing the nature of the incarnation) than simply to see that Paul is contrasting Adam's earthly origin, with that of our Lord, whose origins are heavenly. In the next verse (48), Paul points out that through union with Christ, believers now share in both kinds of existence. "*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.*" Paul sees Adam and Christ as the heads of two distinct types of existence. Adam stands at the head of the human race as fallen (and therefore corruptible), while Christ is the head of the redeemed (incorruptible). According to Paul, Adam is the pattern for all of his descendants. Adam, and all of his descendants, are of the earth. In Adam, we all die (v. 22). But Jesus Christ is of a different and heavenly order.

Much of the way this is phrased has to do with Paul's polemic against the Greek notion which sees the soul/spirit as immortal, and the body as somehow and somehow, a hindrance to truly spiritual existence. It is self-evident that our earthly bodies are corrupt and that they decay at death, although the soul lives on. But Paul's point is that all those in Christ, are not only connected to Adam and therefore, an earthly existence, but they are also identified with Christ and a heavenly existence (which as Paul has already pointed out, entails a spiritual and incorruptible existence).

This means that we shall be like Jesus Christ in the resurrection. We will be raised from the dead with the same kind of resurrection body that Jesus now has. As Paul puts it in Philippians 3:21—"[Jesus] *will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself;*" a point made plain in verse 49. "*Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.*" Since we are "in Adam," we bear the likeness of our

¹¹ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 224.

¹² Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 791.

¹³ Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 792.

first father—our normal state is earthly, that existence appropriate to life on earth. But even as we now bear the likeness of Adam (corruptible), so too, one day we will bear the likeness of the second Adam (Jesus)—in the resurrection at the end of the age.

This remarkable chapter now comes to its climax, (one commentator calls it a magnificent crescendo)¹⁴ when Paul makes it clear that all those in Christ yet who are still corruptible (“flesh and blood”) will be raised from the dead. In an instant, we will all be changed on the great day of resurrection! Our bodies will no longer be subject to death and decay, as they are now. In the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we too triumph over death and the grave! This is the basis for Christian hope.

In verse 50, Paul states, “*I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.*” Paul begins with a solemn declaration—“I declare”—to ensure that his reader/hearer does not miss the significance of what follows. For Paul, flesh and blood is yet another way of speaking of the present existence of all those in Adam.¹⁵ The fact that our bodies are flesh and blood, remind us of our weakness and subjection to death and decay. The fact that we cannot inherit the kingdom in our present state of existence clearly indicates that our present bodies must be transformed, in order to enter into the glories of the age to come. Our present perishable flesh (sinful and corrupt) must become imperishable (redeemed and incorruptible).

When this will happen, is now detailed by Paul in verses 51-52. “*Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.*” Once again, Paul affirms the importance of hearing (understanding) what follows—“behold.” Paul will now reveal the timing and nature of the great mystery—when the last trump sounds, the dead are raised. The word “sleep” is a metaphorical reference to death, since those “sown” will be raised when our Lord returns.

The key point is that all those in Christ will be changed from a perishable and corruptible existence to an imperishable and incorruptible existence! Notice the stress upon continuity, change implies not an entirely new existence but a transformed existence. The problem facing the Corinthians is the exact opposite of the problem Paul faced in Thessalonika (cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:13 ff). In that church, the problem was the fear that those who died before the *parousia* would miss out on the resurrection. Paul informs the Thessalonians that the dead will rise first. With the Corinthians, the issue is one of process. How will flesh and blood, which is corruptible, inherit that which is incorruptible? How can flesh and blood be transformed? Paul’s answer is direct.

We will be changed when we are raised from the dead at the end of the age. This change will be instantaneous—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye. Furthermore it will occur at the last trumpet (not at death, as preterists erroneously teach), which is clearly associated with the end of the age (cf. Matthew 24:31; 1 Thessalonians 4:16). When our Lord returns, we will be instantly changed and raised imperishable! That our present existence must be changed is a necessity, since our present nature is not suited for the age to come, as spelled out in verse 53. “*For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality.*”

¹⁴ Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 797.

¹⁵ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 226-227.

The corruption of human nature due to sin (including death and decay), must give way to that which is imperishable (life and immortality). As we are presently clothed with the likeness of the earthly man, in that day we must be clothed in the likeness of Jesus Christ. The resurrection body will not be subject to death nor decay. As Paul indicates in verse 54, we will have the same kind of body our Lord had after his resurrection (our bodies, now raised and transformed). *“When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’”*

For Paul, this not only fulfills biblical expectations—he quotes from Isaiah 25:8 (part of our Old Testament lesson)—this is the great climax of redemptive history! Our greatest fear has been conquered. Our greatest enemy—death—has been defeated! So great is this victory, that Paul can virtually mock death, singing of the glorious triumph yet to come in the following verse. *“O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?”* These words also contain a loud echo from Hosea 13:14—*“Shall I ransom them from the power of Sheol? Shall I redeem them from Death? O Death, where are your plagues? O Sheol, where is your sting? Compassion is hidden from my eyes.”* Death has been totally defeated by Jesus Christ. The sting of death is now gone.

But even as he finishes up with his words of triumph, in verse 56 Paul returns to reason why death came about in the first place—human sin. *“The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.”* As Paul puts it in Romans 6:23, the wages of sin is death. Here, he tells the Corinthians the reason that we die is because in Adam we are all sinners—as he said in verse 22, “In Adam we all die.” Ironically, it is the law, which is holy, righteous and good, instead of giving us life, which actually exposes that sin which lies within, and therefore condemns us by inflicting the curse upon all of us for our infractions of God’s commands, which is death.

But Paul will not leave us under a word of condemnation! *“But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”* As if he were not clear enough, Paul reiterates one more time, that our victory over death is not ours. It is a victory which has been won for us by Jesus Christ through his shed blood for us which turns aside God’ anger toward us, and in his triumphant resurrection! This is not something we earned, but something we have been given.

This leads Paul to one final word of exhortation in verse 58, *“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.”* In the light of what has just been said, Paul exhorts to consider that since Christ has given us such a glorious victory—the Corinthians are to stand firm and not be moved—that is, they are not to be double-minded. Despite the present circumstances and uncertainty, the Corinthians can continue their labor because the final outcome has been secured through Christ’s resurrection. There is no reason to eat, drink as people without hope, because the labors of God’s people are never in vain! For even as Jesus died for us, so too he has been raised from the dead. And because he has been raised from the dead, so will we.

Death (when body and soul are torn apart because of human sin) is not the end. For on that great day when Jesus Christ comes back, the dead in Christ will be raised, and we shall all be changed. We will be immediately transformed from lowly to heavenly bodies, from corruptible flesh to incorruptible bodies like Jesus had in his resurrection. And so “in a flash,” in the twinkling of an eye, we shall all be raised.

This, then, is our application. Maranatha! Come quickly, Lord Jesus!