

1 Corinthians 15:35–58

BUT SOMEONE may ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?”³⁶How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.³⁷When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else.³⁸But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body.³⁹All flesh is not the same: Men have one kind of flesh, animals have another, birds another and fish another.⁴⁰There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies; but the splendor of the heavenly bodies is one kind, and the splendor of the earthly bodies is another.⁴¹The sun has one kind of splendor, the moon another and the stars another; and star differs from star in splendor.

⁴²So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; ⁴³it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; ⁴⁴it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.

If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.⁴⁵So it is written: “The first man Adam became a living being”; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit.⁴⁶The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual.⁴⁷The first man was of the dust of the earth, the second man from heaven.⁴⁸As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the man from heaven, so also are those who are of heaven.⁴⁹And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven.

⁵⁰I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.⁵¹Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—⁵²in 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.⁵³For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.⁵⁴When 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?”

⁵⁶The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.⁵⁷But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁵⁸Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

Original Meaning

VERSES 35–58 RESPOND to the potential objection that verse 35 notes. “How are the dead raised?” was probably not so much a genuine question but a way of mocking the whole notion of bodily resurrection. Paul’s reply again falls into three parts. Verses 36–44a provide analogies from the created world to describe the resurrection body. Verses 44b–49 argue for the need of a heavenly body from the existence of an earthly body. Verses 50–57 describe why such transformation is necessary. Paul then closes the chapter with commands to stand firm in true belief and action (v. 58).

The first analogy Paul uses to illustrate the resurrection body is that of seed and plant (cf. John 12:24, though Jesus’ point there is somewhat different). By being buried in the ground, the seed seemingly dies, and it certainly decomposes. Yet on that very spot new life emerges, totally different in appearance from the seed, and yet somehow the mature plant remains the same living entity (vv. 36–38). In fact, the world is filled with different kinds of bodies (v. 39—“flesh” here does not mean “sinful nature”) that God has created. So why should it be thought incredible that he could create still one more kind—a resurrected human body? So too the heavenly bodies—sun, moon, and stars—differ in nature and brilliance (v. 41). And an even greater gap exists between the earthly bodies, which all have certain identifiable features in common, and the heavenly bodies, which also resemble each other in certain aspects (v. 40).

Verses 42–44a make clear where Paul is going with all of these analogies. There yet await for the Corinthians resurrection bodies that will be far more glorious than their present ones. Unlike their current bodies, these new ones will be fitted for eternity, never again to die or be limited by sin or impotence (vv. 42–43). Whereas humans in this world are animated by merely physical life, believers will one day be fully empowered by the Spirit (v. 44a). The terms “natural” and “spiritual” in verse 44 use the identical language Paul has already used in 2:6–16 to indicate the difference between Christians and non-Christians. In this context, the contrast might better be indicated by translating the adjectives as “natural” and “supernatural.”

Verses 44b–49 pick up on widespread ancient speculation, in both Jewish and Greek circles, that there were two primal human beings, an earthly one and a heavenly one. Plato, for example, thought of all creation as a pale shadow of heavenly archetypes. Philo interpreted Genesis 1–3 allegorically and thought that God originally created two human men, one who lived on earth and rebelled (chaps. 2–3) and his perfect, heavenly counterpart (chap. 1). Paul agrees that there are two progenitors of humanity (v. 44b). But he makes Jesus the perfect “Adam” (using the Hebrew play on words in which Adam means “man”) and stresses that he came *after* the first Adam (i.e., in Christ’s incarnation), not before (vv. 46–47).

So too believers who have shared in the finite, fallen likeness of the first Adam can look forward to sharing in the kind of perfect humanity Jesus embodied, but only after this life, when Jesus comes back again (vv. 48–49; the NIV footnote here [“so let us”] is less likely than the text [“so shall we”]). To make this point, Paul cites Genesis 2:7 and then uses it as a springboard for comparing the far more glorious humanity of Jesus, who not only has the breath of human life but is able to give eternal, spiritual sustenance to others (v. 45).

Verses 50–57 further unpack the need for bodily transformation. Frail, mortal humanity cannot survive in God’s eternal and perfectly holy presence. “Flesh and blood” in verse 50 was a stock idiom in Jewish circles for “a mere mortal” and does not contradict what Paul has already

stressed, that resurrection experience is a bodily one (cf. Jesus' reference to having "flesh and bones" in Luke 24:39). But it must be a body that is "imperishable" and "immortal" (vv. 52b–54a).

Verse 51 supplies more information about the time at which this transformation will take place. On the term "mystery," see under 2:7 (pp. 63–64). The secret that Paul is revealing here is that believers' bodily resurrections will occur when Christ returns. Not all Christians will die first, since some will be alive when he comes back. But all will undergo whatever transformation is necessary to give them their glorified bodies. This change will take place instantaneously not gradually. The trumpet (v. 52a) was a stock metaphor in biblical literature to herald the end (cf. Joel 2:1; Zech. 9:14; Matt. 24:31; 1 Thess. 4:16; and the seven trumpets of Rev. 8:2–9:14).

When all this has happened, then the way will be paved for the events of verses 24–28 to unfold. The climax of this series of events for believers is the destruction of death itself, as Isaiah had predicted (v. 54b, quoting Isa. 25:8). Paul breaks out into a rhapsody at the thought of this marvelous prospect, quoting and slightly adapting Hosea 13:14 (v. 55). And, as in Romans 6–8, he recalls that sin is the primary culprit that has led to both physical and spiritual death, while the law, apart from pointing people to Christ, serves only to promote sin, as it increases conscious rebellion against God's standards (v. 56; cf. Gal. 3:19–24). But praise God that this deadly sequence has been interrupted by the victory over death God has wrought through the death and resurrection of Jesus (v. 57)!

Appropriately, Paul returns from these lofty flights of theological reflection to the practical implications for the Corinthians (v. 58). Since Christ has been raised bodily, they too will one day be physically transformed. Therefore they should remain unwaveringly committed to orthodox theology and totally dedicated to the work of the gospel—the purity of living and the faithful exercise of their distinctive avenues of service. No matter what the cost in this life, they can count on the ultimate triumph of all God's people and all his purposes.

Bridging Contexts

THE KEY THEME that permeates verses 35–58 is the simultaneous continuity and discontinuity between believers' earthly bodies and their resurrection bodies. Clearly, though, the stress remains on the latter. There is molecular continuity between seed and plant, but who would have guessed it were it not for the recurring cause and effect relationship between planting a seed and seeing new life sprout in the very place the seed was planted? So one may speak of some kind of ongoing personal identity between natural and spiritual bodies but anticipate substantial physical change.

Beyond this, Scripture offers few clues to answer our more detailed questions about what these new bodies will be like. We may hazard some guesses from what we know of Christ's resurrected body—it was tangible, it could eat but didn't have to, but it could also appear and disappear and pass through locked doors (Luke 24; John 20–21). Yet precisely because he had not yet ascended and been fully exalted and glorified, even Jesus' body as the Gospels describe it may not have been exactly what he ended up with. One could assume, for example, that he eventually no longer had any scars in his hands and side.

Some see the references to earthly and heavenly bodies in verse 40 as different from the examples given in verses 39 and 41. In that event, Paul may be giving additional analogies, thinking, for example, of the differences among the various earthly terrains (mountains, rivers, canyons, oceans) and among various kinds of supernatural creatures (angels, demons). But this seems unlikely in view of the framing verses that are surely meant to explain this particular text.

At any rate, there is no support at all here for a view, as in Mormonism, that distinguishes between kinds of heavenly bodies that believers will receive. The whole point in contrasting sun, moon, and stars is not to suggest three different kinds of resurrection bodies but to give further examples of how God can create different kinds of physical entities in general.

Verses 42–44a make plain that Paul is comparing and contrasting only *two* kinds of human bodies—those that live in this world and those that will live in the next. The attributes described in these verses are perhaps best epitomized in Revelation 21:4: “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

Verses 44b–49 respond to competing views about the afterlife. They affirm three crucial truths that must be preserved. First, a new body is a necessity for experiencing the world to come. Escape into an *eternally* disembodied state is not an option. Second, that new form of existence does not come until Christ’s return. This refutes all claims by believers to having “arrived,” spiritually speaking, in this life. Third, this new heavenly body will be far more glorious than anything we currently experience or imagine.

Verse 50 reminds us that our current sinful and mortal bodies are incapable and unworthy of coexisting with an infinite, holy God.

Verses 51–52 contain language and imagery that closely resembles 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18, with its description of death as sleep and resurrection at the last trumpet. The latter passage contains the verse that has given rise to the notion of a “rapture” and spawned countless debates about “pre-,” “mid-,” or “post-tribulationism” (v. 17). Because of the close correlation between the two passages, and because Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 has been speaking exclusively of transformations occurring at the time of Christ’s public return (v. 23), it is unnatural to think of the rapture of 1 Thessalonians as some separate, prior event. The use of trumpet imagery with the Day of the Lord elsewhere in the Bible (see above, p. 317), and in Jewish thought more generally, reinforces this analysis. But again many texts of Scripture must be brought to bear on the debate; exegesis of 1 Corinthians alone will not solve the problems. And since all sides agree that no single passage ever discusses the rapture and the tribulation at the same time, it seems overly restrictive to insist that any one view of the relationship must be held if one is to participate in a certain church or Christian organization.

First Thessalonians 4:15 has also been said to contradict 1 Corinthians 15 by affirming that Paul initially believed that he would live until Christ’s return, a view he betrays no knowledge of here and even more explicitly rejects in 2 Corinthians 1:8–11. Others are less certain which group Paul classifies himself with in verse 51. Often elaborate hypotheses about “development” in Paul’s theology ensue. But all of this reads far too much into each of the texts.

Grammatically, the phrase “we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord” (1 Thess. 4:15) means simply “whichever Christians are still alive,” and nowhere else does Paul unequivocally claim to know if he will be a part of this group of believers.

Verse 56, appearing as incidentally as it does, shows us that Paul's theology of the role of the Law in producing sin and death was not limited to the more polemical contexts of Galatians 3 or Philippians 3 nor merely the product of his later thinking, as in Romans 6–7. The very fact that it emerges so incidentally here testifies to its early, foundational role in Paul's thought. Presumably he has taught on the subject already in Corinth and, for once, can assume they still understand it. Increasing transgressions is not the sole purpose of the Law. Indeed Reformation theology has traditionally recognized three uses of the Law, the other two of which are far more positive—as a deterrent to sin and as a moral instruction for Christians. But the first one is an important use and supports in some measure the classic Lutheran dichotomy between law and gospel.

Given the Corinthians' tendency to divorce theology from ethics, Paul's conclusion (v. 58) remains telling. It is just like him to conclude his discussion with very practical applications. Here he reminds us that it is the resurrection hope, and only this hope, that keeps believers in every place and time from despair and helps them stay faithful in Christian service. In fact, the resurrection demonstrates four sweeping principles that affect all of life: truth is stronger than falsehood, good is stronger than evil, love is stronger than hatred, and life is stronger than death.

Contemporary Significance

THE NATURE OF THE resurrection body remains hotly debated, as Christians continue to try to wrest more detail from the Scriptures than is present in them.

One minority perspective argues that Christ's resurrection body, as the exemplar for our resurrection bodies, was normally invisible and immaterial, since most of the time during his forty days of appearances he was not present with the disciples. In other circles, some Christians still continue to object to cremation,¹² as if God's power in reconstituting and transforming a believer's body were limited to situations in which the corpse was preserved relatively intact! Both debates distract attention from Paul's primary concern, which is to guard against an overly realized eschatology that leads to an overly triumphalist ecclesiology—that is, claiming for the present era too many of the blessings and victories of the age to come (see pp. 25–27 for explanation and illustrations).

If we are right in suspecting that this triumphalism reflected the attitudes and messages of the Corinthians claiming to speak under the Spirit's inspiration, then the most analogous dangers in our contemporary world surround those, particularly within the charismatic movement, who make overly inflated claims for the degree of spiritual maturity we can achieve in this life. Noncharismatic circles have their counterparts with teaching on Christian perfection and the possibility of going days, months, and even years without sinning. The "prosperity gospel" tricks people into thinking that they can have and deserve excessive health and wealth in this life. Against all of these trends, Paul insists that we haven't yet "arrived," nor will we arrive this side of Christ's return.

Conservative Christians unfortunately continue to debate the different positions on the millennium and rapture in divisive ways, though fortunately much of this is subsiding. Many parachurch organizations have come to recognize that neither doctrine is clear enough in Scripture to merit its inclusion in a statement of faith that their employees are required to

affirm. Major exceptions usually involve educational or missionary organizations, whose institutional inertia brings change more slowly. The church can learn a good lesson from the parachurch movement and join in refusing to make pre-, post- or amillennialism, or pre-, mid- or posttribulationism a part of their doctrinal statements, tests of orthodoxy, or criteria of fellowship or of cooperation with other believers. Again, many of the larger, growing churches have already recognized this, but others still have a long way to go.

Although the NIV footnote for verse 49 (“so let us”) is not as likely as the text (“so shall we”), it reminds us of the fact that because we will one day fully bear the image of Christ, who is the perfect reflection of God, we should encourage each other to work toward re-creating that image even now. Ephesians 4:24 describes this process as putting “on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”

Contemporary Christianity needs to recover this Reformation emphasis on the image of God as moral and relational. We have been captivated by pop psychologies that tend to define God’s image as a trichotomous division of the human psyche, or by the neo-orthodox equation of the image with the creation of male and female, or even by an anti-ecological distortion of the command to exercise dominion over the earth (in the context of the *imago Dei*—Gen. 1:27–28).

Interestingly, Paul here associates God’s image (“likeness”) with his glory (v. 43), as also in 11:7. And 2 Corinthians 3:7–18 links God’s glory with his revelation to Moses on Sinai, a revelation that disclosed that glory in terms of God’s communicable attributes (Ex. 33:18–34:7). In many circles eager to preserve God’s truth, Christians today need to work equally hard at showing his mercy and modeling the facets of God’s image that Exodus 34:6–7a recounts: “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished.”

The ultimate vanquishing of death, with which 1 Corinthians 15 culminates, surely speaks volumes to those who continue to live in fear of death today. It is not just Sartre who has raised the specter of suicide as the only serious question for humans to debate. Existential and ecological fears pervade much of the non-Christian world. Christians ought to fear less. They may grieve the loss of loved ones and have a certain anxiety related to the unknown factors surrounding their own death, but neither reaction ought to be “like the rest of men who have no hope” (1 Thess. 4:13). Funerals for Christians ought to be first of all celebrations of their “homegoing.” While preserving a culturally appropriate solemnity, a spirit of joy and a message of hope should nevertheless pervade such ceremonies, which may even include a tasteful evangelistic address to unbelievers present. And the hope of resurrection should encourage those of us who remain alive to persevere in a “long obedience in the same direction” (v. 58).¹

¹ Blomberg, C. (1994). [1 Corinthians](#) (pp. 314–322). Zondervan Publishing House.