

Finally Home: What Heaven Means for Earth

Resurrection

1 Corinthians 15:35-58

Mark Vroegop

³⁵ But someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?” ³⁶ You foolish person! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. 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. ³⁸ But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. ³⁹ For not all flesh is the same, but there is one kind for humans, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. ⁴⁰ 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. ⁴¹ 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. ⁴² So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. ⁴³ It is sown in dishonor; 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. ⁴⁵ Thus it is written, “The first man Adam became a living being”; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. ⁴⁶ But it is not the spiritual that is first but the natural, and then the spiritual. ⁴⁷ The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. ⁴⁸ 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. ⁴⁹ Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven. ⁵⁰ I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. ⁵¹ Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, ⁵² 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. ⁵³ For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. ⁵⁴ 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.” ⁵⁵ “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” ⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. 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. 1 Corinthians 15:35-58 (ESV)

I wonder how many of you can complete this sentence that has historically been a part of a Christian burial service: “...ashes to _____ and dust to _____.” You may not know that that statement is a part of the grave-side liturgy and readings from the *Book of Common Prayer*. After the Protestant Reformation swept England, the newly formed Anglican Church sought to bring unity to church worship and practice after the break from the Roman Catholic Church by producing a book that provided specific language for church services. It was widely used, and in some seasons of church history, it was required to be used.

The language of “ashes to ashes and dust to dust” is part of a longer statement which is loaded with important truths:

FORASMUCH as it hath pleased Almighty God, in his wise providence, to take out of this world the soul of our deceased brother, we therefore commit his body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; looking for the general Resurrection in the last day, and the life of the world to come, through our LORD JESUS CHRIST; at whose second coming in glorious majesty to judge the world, the earth and the sea shall give up their dead; and the corruptible bodies of those who sleep in him shall be changed, and made like unto his own glorious body; according to the mighty working whereby he is able to subdue all things unto himself.¹

It is unfortunate that the only part of this statement that is remembered is the “ashes to ashes” portion because those words and the committal of the body to ground are not hopeful without the connection to “the general resurrection in the last day, and the life of the world to come.” In fact, “ashes to ashes and dust to dust”, frankly, is meaningless without the resurrection.

Resurrection: Life after Life after Death

For the last two weeks we have been thinking and learning about heaven, and today we need to spend some time talking about the resurrection because it is central to the future and because it is a vital part of the gospel message. Many of you immediately think about Easter when I mention the word “resurrection,” but the Bible also talks about a future resurrection that is going to take place.

Now our text is 1 Corinthians 15, and we are going to learn about the various aspects of this resurrection and why it is important. But first, let me highlight a few things by way of introduction and context.

First, a definition. Resurrection is the reversal of death, a reuniting of our soul and body, and a new life after ‘life after death’.² It is a future event when God completes salvation and judgment by raising the dead and establishing a new physical existence either on the New Earth or in Hell.

For the last two weeks I’ve been talking about “heaven.” And that is an appropriate and biblical term to use when talking about Colossians 3 and Revelation 4. However, as you will see next week, the ultimate destination for the believer in eternity is not just heaven, but is the New Heaven and the New Earth. Or to be very specific, believers live in the New Earth that will be renewed as the whole earth becomes a Garden of Eden.

Now I’ve called it “life after life after death” because the resurrection of the dead has not happened yet. However, those who have died are already experiencing life after death. Every human being is both soul and body, and at death there is a separation of the immaterial and material part of our humanity. 2 Corinthians 5:8 tells us that the believer when absent from the body is at home with the Lord. So while resurrection, the granting of a new body, has not yet

¹ <http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1789Selections/Burial.htm>

² N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 30-31 as cited in Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshars, *Doctrine – What the Church Should Believe*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 282.

happened, there is a life of joy and happiness for those who are in Christ and a life of punishment and torment for those still in their sins. Theologically this is called the intermediate state – the life after death that awaits eternal life in a resurrected body.

Resurrection does not mean that there is a second chance for receiving Jesus after a person has died. Reincarnation, (the Hindu belief that the soul migrates to another person or thing until purification is achieved), and purgatory, (the Roman Catholic belief that one is able to be purified in the after-life), do not fit with the Biblical teaching in Hebrews 9:27 that “it is appointed for man to die once and after that comes judgment...”³ and the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ (Heb. 10:10).

What’s more, while the Bible often refers to death as “sleeping” (1 Cor. 15:51), the use of the word or phrase should not be taken literally as if death results in a time period of unconscious existence. This view is called “soul sleep,” and it also does not fit with a biblical framework based upon 2 Corinthians 5:8 where Paul says, “absent from the body is at home with the Lord.”

Therefore, when a person dies there is a separation of soul and body. Believers are welcomed into Christ’s presence where they experience joy and fellowship with Him (Phil 1:23), but they are not yet raised from the dead. This “life after death” is real and joyful, but it is not yet physical. The resurrection of the dead is the final step in God’s redemptive plan to restore all things back to Himself. It is life after life after death.

Additionally, you need to know that the doctrine of the resurrection was counter-cultural in the first century. The dominant worldview at the time was shaped by Plato who believed in the immortality of the soul, but not the body. In fact, he posited that the soul is the only aspect of a human being that really mattered; the body was merely a “case” for the all-important and eternal soul. This view of the after-life led to licentious and immoral behavior since the body was not spiritually significant. In 1 Corinthians 6:12-20, Paul addressed this worldview head-on in terms of morality when he says, “Do you not know that body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God with your body” (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

In other words, the body matters! There is a future day where the resurrection will take place and the dead will be brought back to life. On that great day, those who are in Christ will have a body like Jesus.’ I believe that we will recognize one another, and we will live in fellowship with Jesus on the New Earth.

Resurrection shows us that God places value on the spiritual and the physical realm. It shows us that both our souls and our bodies are important to God. The resurrection is the final moment when Christ, according to the *Book of Common Prayer*, is able to subdue all things unto Himself. The raising of the dead is the last event in the Good News of the gospel, and has sweeping implications for how we live right now. In fact, it is so important that Paul wrote all of 1 Corinthians 15 so that believers might know what the resurrection is like and what it is all about.

³ Driscoll and Breshears, 280.

Resurrection: Similar but Different Lives

Paul was writing to the church at Corinth and chapter 15 addresses the issue of the Resurrection because there were people in the church who were either doubting or denying Christ's resurrection and any future resurrection for believers. Verses 12-34 identify the centrality of the resurrection to the Christian faith - ¹⁷ *And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. 1 Corinthians 15:17 (ESV)*. The resurrection is a vital part of the gospel.

That is why in verses 35-36 Paul's tone is pretty direct. He identifies two questions that someone has asked: "How are the dead raised?" and "With what kind of body do they come?" He calls the person who asks these questions foolish. So it must be that these questions are asked from disbelief not from a humble inquiry as to what is going to happen. The Corinthians are doubting the reality of the resurrection. And Paul seeks to counter the prevailing Platonic/Gnostic worldview and disbelief by teaching this church what a resurrected life will be like.

Paul attempts to show them how the resurrection is similar and different from how they understand life now. There is both continuity and discontinuity in the resurrection with our lives now. Let's look at this in four key areas.

Physical Bodies (vv. 35-39)

As Paul explains the reality of the resurrection, he moves from things that can be understood and which are familiar to things which are more mysterious and future. He starts in verses 35-39 with the physical world to show that the concept of a resurrected body should not seem all that unusual. He gives three examples or illustrations:

1. Farming involves planting something dead that comes to life

The concept or category of life from death is more familiar than these people even realize. Every time they plant, they are believing in this reality. In order for something to come to life it has to die first. The resurrection is not a completely unreasonable idea.

2. What is sown is different than what comes to life

A seed is put into the ground ("a bare kernel"), and what is produced from that seed appears to be completely different than what was planted. Both the seed and the plant are the same essence, but they do not appear to be the same. Each seed has its own body (v. 38) which means that the seed and the body are the same but unique in their form.

3. Life takes many different forms

Paul points to creation as another example. He says, "...not all flesh is the same" (v. 39). In other words, not everything that is alive on earth has the same body. There is a different kind of body for humans, for animals, for birds, and for fish. All of them are alive, but they do not take the same form. In other words, we experience life in many different forms while on earth. It is a part of the created order.

Paul's first explanation is meant to show that the resurrection is not some far-fetched philosophical idea. Believing that a body placed in the ground will be one day be raised to a new life is not illogical or crazy as some in the church at Corinth might believe. They could look around at the created order and see similar realities as the resurrection. It is not so unbelievable that the resurrection will take place. In fact, after it happens it will seem as normal as seeing a field of grain knowing that it was planted with seed.

While it is hard to imagine what it will be like to have resurrected bodies and live on the New Earth, this text would indicate that when we are there, it will seem as logical and normal as how planting leads to a harvest and as there are different life forms. In fact, a resurrected existence will seem even more normal and right than what we know now because of the brokenness in us and in the world, while common and familiar, is not the way life was meant to be.

Glory (vv. 40-44)

The second aspect of the resurrection is the matter of "glory." Now we talked about this last week in reference to who God is and what He is like as we examined Revelation 4. I defined God's glory as His weightiness, worth, other-ness, and sovereign beauty. God's glory is the most valuable, attractive and dangerous reality in the universe. And in our resurrected bodies we share in His glory.

There are a number of texts that point us this direction:

² *Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. 1 John 3:2 (ESV)*

¹⁷ *and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. Romans 8:17 (ESV)*

²¹ *who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. Philippians 3:21 (ESV)*

So, there is a different kind of "glory" that we will possess in the future. Our physical bodies will be free from sin, temptation, decay, and everything associated with the brokenness of the world. Our bodies will be similar to what we possess now, but they will have different glory.

In verse 40 Paul simply states that there is a difference between heavenly bodies and earthly bodies in terms of the glory that they possess. There is continuity in the fact that both bodies have "glory," but there is discontinuity in the fact that the heavenly bodies have "glory" of another kind.

Once again, Paul turns to creation in order to illustrate the point that different created objects have different kinds of glory. In verse 41 he identifies that the glory of the sun is different than the glory of the moon. The glory of the sun and moon is different than the glory of the stars. What's more, the glory of each star is often different. The created world is filled with different kinds of glory.

Verse 42 makes the conclusion very plain: *“So it is with the resurrection of the dead.”* Paul is helping us to understand what the resurrection will be like by drawing from realities that we presently understand and experience. The resurrection in this respect will seem rather familiar.

And yet the resurrection will also be something that creates new categories of life. In verses 42-44, Paul sets up a series of contrasts to highlight the difference between earthly and heavenly bodies. He uses the word “sown” to refer to earthly bodies and “raised” to refer to heavenly bodies:

- v. 42 – sown perishable; raised imperishable
- v. 43 – sown in dishonor; raised in glory
- v. 43 – sown in weakness; raised in power
- v. 44 – sown in a natural body; raised in a spiritual body

The contrast is pretty stunning. Just think about what it will be like to live a life very similar to this one in some respects but characterized by words like imperishable, glory, power, and spiritual. Or think of words like perfect, joyful, fulfilling, happy, and satisfying. Think of the best moment in your lifetime – those small pockets of time when it seems like everything was just as it should be. And then consider that life in eternity will be like that, but it won't be a dream. It will be as real as this moment right now. It will be heaven on earth. And it will be full of glory – around us and in us.

Image (vv. 45-49)

The third aspect of our resurrected bodies that Paul highlights relates to the issue of image. What kind of likeness will we have in eternity? The answer is found 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.”* Believers in Jesus will be changed from the image of Adam to the image of Christ. The resurrection of Jesus becomes a harbinger of what is to come for His followers.

To make this point clear, Paul quotes Genesis 2:7 in verse 45 with the emphasis being on the fact that there are two “Adams.” The first Adam was created out of the dust and given life. The second Adam (Jesus) was given a spiritual and imperishable body. Adam and Jesus become representatives of the natural body and the spiritual / glorified body which believers are given. Our bodies, at present, bear the image of Adam. But in the future, they will bear the image of Jesus.

In verses 46-48, Paul provides additional insight into the difference between Adam-bodies and Christ-bodies.

- v. 46 - The natural body is first and the spiritual body is yet to come in the resurrection
- v. 47 – The first man and the body associated with him are earthly while the bodies associated with Jesus will be heavenly
- v. 48 – As we identify now with Adam in the earthly body, so too will we identify with Christ in a heavenly body

In the same way that our bodies are deeply and fundamentally connected to Adam and the earth now, so too will they be deeply and fundamentally connected to Jesus in the future. So just think of all the things that are a familiar part of the limitations of being human. We need shelter, food, and water. We need sleep. We get tired, hungry, and sick. We age. Friends move away. Family members die. Don't get me wrong, there are also wonderful things about our humanity, but it is always limited or incomplete. And as fundamental as those things are to our humanity, our resurrected bodies will be immortal, imperishable, free from sickness and death, full of power, and without the fear of any of it ever changing. In the same way that we reflect the image of Adam, we will reflect the image of Jesus. And there are not sufficient words to describe the beauty of that reality.

But we are not the only ones who are waiting for this moment. The apostle Paul tells us that the entire creation is longing for this day:

¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²² For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. ²³ And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. Romans 8:19–23 (ESV)

Our hope in the resurrection is the hope of the entire creation...the longing for the end of the effects of sin in the world.

Hope (vv. 50-57)

The final aspect of the resurrection that is highlighted here is in regards to the hope for the future and the hope of what that resurrection will mean. The resurrection is something to hope for in multiple ways and for multiple reasons.

Verse 50 tells us that something more has to happen to us before we enter into our eternal home. Sin has affected our position and our world. We need to be made fit for the glory of God's presence and that is yet to come.

Verses 51-54 tells us that there is a mysterious day coming. It is mysterious because we don't know when it is going to come, and what is going to happen is amazing! Notice the following:

- Every believer will be changed but not all believers will die. When Jesus returns some believers will not experience death, but they will all be given resurrected bodies.
- The trumpet will sound, announcing the Lord's return, the dead will rise from their graves, and believers will be "caught up together with them in the clouds" (1Thess 4:17).
- The effect of this moment and transformation will be that our perishable bodies will be made imperishable and our mortal bodies will be made immortal.

Now that is what will happen, and we can look forward to that moment. However, this transformation at resurrection has more meaning than just what happens physically. This

resurrection has enormous spiritual and redemptive significance because it signals the final and ultimate defeat of sin and death. That is why Paul cites Isaiah 25:8 and Hosea 13:14– “Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death where is your victory? O Death where is your sting?”

The point of the resurrection is not just the physical change of the followers of Jesus, as glorious as it is! The resurrection is the exclamation point on the victory that we have through Jesus Christ. The beauty of the resurrection is not just the immortality, the glory or the power. It is all that plus the fact that it was Jesus who made that victory possible. Therefore, resurrected bodies in the New Heavens and the New Earth point to Him and His victory.

What the Resurrection Means Now

Having considered the significance of the resurrection from 1 Corinthians 15 and a number of other passages, let me give you a few concluding thoughts as to what the resurrection means for living on earth right now.

While this life isn't all there is, it matters. The world around all of us is temporary. We are all in the process of dying, and there is an eternity to be considered. But that eternity – whether heaven or hell as your destiny – is determined by what you do with Jesus now. There will be no second chances. Eternity is based upon your response to your sin and the offering of forgiveness through Jesus now.

While the body will be transformed, what you do with it matters. There still remains a subtle Platonic view of the soul and body with many people in our culture – even Christians. You need to know that your heart and your actions matter. What you believe and what you do are both important and linked. Be careful to not fall into the trap of being “spiritual” and discounting the “physical.” While the physical has yet to be fully subdued, it is still important and needs to be a part of what it means to follow Jesus.

While the resurrection is in the future, it matters now. Verse 58 gives us some very clear implications. I love how the NIV translates it: 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 labor in the Lord is not in vain. 1 Corinthians 15:58 (NIV).*

Why is our labor not in vain? Why should we remain steadfast all the way to the end of our lives? Why should we keep serving? Why do we have hope when we bury our loved ones? Why can we say “ashes to ashes and dust to dust” with sorrowful joy? Because we are *looking for the general Resurrection in the last day, and the life of the world to come, through our LORD JESUS CHRIST.*

We believe that there is life after life after death.

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