

THE GLORIOUS DESTINY OF OUR BODIES

1 Corinthians 15

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Today's Scripture is 1 Corinthians 15. We look at this chapter for the third time. Today's title is "The Glorious Destiny of Our bodies." To many, the idea of a resurrection of the body seems foolish. When Paul finished preaching to the court of Athenian philosophers on Mars Hill about the resurrection of the dead, the Scripture says that some of them sneered (Acts 17:32). When Paul preached to the Roman governor, Festus, that Christ had risen from the dead, Festus interrupted him at that point and dismissed him with the words "You are out of your mind" (Acts 26:24). Paul responded that he was not insane, that his words were true and reasonable. Even among Christians, the teaching of the resurrection of the body may pose problems. How will God raise someone who has been dead for centuries and whose corpse has completely returned to the dust? How will He raise those who have been cremated, whose ashes have been scattered to the wind? How will He raise those blown apart in warfare? Or lost and disintegrated in the bowels of the deep ocean floors?

I. How are the dead raised?

That seems like such a reasonable question to ask. But Paul here calls it a foolish question. Foolish? Because everywhere around us are examples of the resurrection order of life. He starts by saying that the glorious destinies of our bodies are illustrated in nature. What's sown differs from what's grown. "Someone may ask, 'How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?' How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed...But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body (1 Corinthians 15:35-38).

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Bulbs are ugly looking things. It's is an ugly-looking thing with the exterior peeling off of it. It doesn't look like it's capable of much. Little do we realize, holding them, what might emerge if we plant them.

In our adult lives, it's possible for us to lose the wonder of nature. But if we didn't know anything about what I hold in my hand, we might assume that they're nothing, just ugliness. Yet the wonder within nature is such that, if this is dropped into the ground and dies, if it loses its own existence, it dissolves and it will come forth as something different—a tulip, a daffodil.

When sown into the ground, each of these dissolves. What comes out is different than what goes into the ground. But there is continuity between what emerges and what has gone in. What comes forth has continuity with what is sown. What if the daffodil complained to God, "God, why did You make me so ugly? Why did You make me with this straggly mop for a head?" The daffodil, at this stage of its existence, does not yet see what it will be.

Paul's point is the same for the human body. "Look at nature," he says. You will see dissolution, difference, and continuity. The human body is like a bulb. In death it is dissolved. What comes forth is different and more glorious. The future of our body is as different from our present body as the beautiful daffodil is from the bulb. What is coming is greater. There will be continuity between what emerges and what is now.

What about those who have been cremated or whose remains have been lost or turned to dust? God is able, with His vast creative ability, to store our present genetic structure in an electronic signal, if He wants. If we can store information on microchips, God can store our entire human personality—the structure that He wants to resurrect—on a microchip and raise it if He desires. The point is that what is sown into the ground by death is dissolved, it is changed, by resurrection. But it is still we who exist. My own theory of the resurrection is that we are going

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to be resurrected to look like a thirty-three year-old! I have some good theological reasons for saying that. Jesus was thirty-three when He was taken up into heaven. I don't believe that babies will be resurrected to be babies. I cannot imagine heaven with a lot of Pampers. The body that is sown will be raised to its fullest potential. Saints who have died at a hundred years of age will not look like they have a hundred years of age. What is sown is different from what is grown. Paul uses a second analogy from nature to illustrate the resurrection of the body and the glorious destiny of the body, by saying that what variety exists in the created order is ordained by God. "All flesh is not the same: Men have one kind of flesh, animals have another, birds another and fish another. There are heavenly bodies and earthly bodies; but the splendor of the heavenly bodies is one kind and the splendor of the earthly bodies is another. The sun has one kind of splendor, the moon another and the stars another; and a star differs from another star in splendor" (1 Corinthians 15:39-41, NIV).

All Paul is saying is that God, in His creative wisdom, has ordained different kinds of splendor among earthly bodies and heavenly bodies. The earthly body of man has one kind of splendor. Fish have another kind of splendor. In the heavens, the stars, the moon, the sun have various modes of splendor, and his whole point is that God has ordained these orders of splendor and the most splendid order that He's ordained is the resurrection body. We find it so difficult to think of life and the existence of life different from the one we now enjoy.

God has made fish after one another. It's a different kind of flesh. If fish were philosophers, if they were capable of thinking, I'm sure that every single philosophical fish would be quite sure that it's impossible for any creature to live outside of water. We are testimonies to the order of life that lives successfully outside of water.

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There is an order of life for us that exists outside of what we now enjoy. We have our earth suit on now. There will come a day when we will have an eternity suit on. Differing orders created by God.

Paul goes on to say, in verses 42–44—still using the analogy of nature—that what is sown differs from what is raised (he’s already stated that point, but he restates it differently here). “So it will be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised 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. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body” (NIV). Sown perishable.

The King James uses “corruptible.” The body is liable to decay. People that try to use a modern technique of freezing the body are only fighting an eventuality. The body will decay. We don’t like to think about it. The word is unpleasant to hear. But our body is rotting. And if Christ doesn’t return for us first, there will come a day when our body will have completely rotted back into the earth. Remember what the sisters of Lazarus said to the Lord, “By this time, he stinketh” (John 11:39). Perishable. But he will be raised incorruptible, no more subject to rotting and decay. The body is sown in dishonor. I don’t know of anything more dishonoring to the body than death. I don’t know of anything more dishonoring to the body than to suffer with an illness that ravishes the body. To dishonor is used to describe someone who is stripped of citizenship. A corpse has no rights, expect perhaps the right to lay interred, undisturbed. It is sown in dishonor. It will be raised in glory and never be dishonored again. It is sown in weakness.

One does not have the strength to resist the pull of death. It is sown in weakness. It is raised in power. In the work of *Holy Dying*, it says this, “The more we sink into the infirmity of age, the nearer we are to immortal youth. All people are young in the other world. That state is an eternal

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spring, ever fresh and flourishing. Now to pass the midnight till noon to be decrepit one minute and all spirit and activity the next minute, must be a desirable change. To call this dying is an abuse of language.”

Paul says the body is sown a natural body and is raised a spiritual body. One word that he uses for natural is the word from which we derive “psyche” or “psychology.” It is the word in Scriptures translated “soul.” It’s the aspect of our mortality that can reason, that can feel, and that makes decisions. That kind of body is sown. It is raised a spiritual body, an eternal body. Made after the character and nature of God.

Paul says, “How are the dead raised?” Foolish—look at nature. It gives an illustration.

II. But then he goes on and gives a second part. That is, the glorious future of the body is imaged in Christ.

“So it is written: “The first man Adam became a living being”; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit. The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual. The first man was of the dust of the earth, the second man from heaven. As 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. And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven” (1 Corinthians 15:45–49, NIV).

Paul makes four contrasts between the first Adam and the last Adam, Christ.

Adam was made a living being. God breathed into him the breath of life. But the last Adam—Christ—was made a life-giving Spirit. Christ is not only a living being, but He’s one who bequeaths life to others. The first Adam came first. And so the natural life precedes the spiritual life. One never has the spiritual body without having the natural body. The last Adam, therefore, comes after. The first Adam is made out of dust. But Christ comes out of heaven. We have born

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the image of the first Adam, all of us. We look different. We have different tints of skin and different colored eyes and different color of hair and different quantity of hair, we may or may not have hair. Different things about us, but we collectively and individually bear the image of Adam.

So also the Scripture says we shall bear His image. Paul says in Philippians 3:21, in helping us get a hold of this, “Who by the power who enables Him to bring everything under His control will transform our lowly bodies so they will be like His glorious body.” Christ, being raised from the dead, had a glorious body. He could come as light, such as to one like Saul, on the road to Damascus. To other disciples, He could come as one who went through closed doors. He has a glorious body.

Why is it that extraterrestrial beings in science fiction—like in “Star Wars,” “The Empire Strikes Back,” and “Close Encounters”—always look so freakish? Extraterrestrial life looks freaky. The body that God is going to give us, thank God, is not going to look like Yoda! John said it well in 1 John 3:2, “Dear friends now we are children of God and what we will be has not been made known. But we know that when He appears we shall be like Him for we shall see Him as He is.” Do you want to know what you’re going to look like in eternity? Read about Christ’s resurrection from the dead.

III. Then Paul tells us the glorious future of our body, which is immortalized in Christ’s victory (verses 50–58).

This is a favorite passage of mine. I find great comfort as I walk to the graveside of persons who have died in the Lord and recite these verses. It is a powerful thing to have the Scripture present. To remind us of the glorious heritage of those who have died in Christ. “I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit

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the imperishable. Listen, I tell you a mystery [When the Scriptures say that it's a mystery, they immediately explain it. We're not left in the dark]: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in 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. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When 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'" (1 Corinthians 15:50–54, NIV).

In these verses, Paul points us to a future moment, to the victory that is coming. He points to the word "flesh and blood," because those are the most corruptible parts of our body. The bone and skeletal structure lasts longer. But the flesh and blood are the first to go. The first to disintegrate. He says that this disintegrating mortal frame is not fit to inherit the kingdom of God. It is going to have to go through transformation. A change is coming. When is the change coming? It's coming at the last trumpet. Here Paul takes language out of the Old Testament and out of the words of the Lord. Joel says in 2:1, "Blow the trumpet in Zion, the day of the Lord is coming...the great day when God makes all things right." Jesus says, in Matthew 24, "At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky and all the nations of the earth shall mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky in power and great glory and He will send His angels with a loud trumpet call and they will gather His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other." A trumpet call!

It'll be in a moment of time. As the NIV puts it, "a flash." The word that's used is the word from which we get "atom." To the Greeks, the atom was that which could not be cut or divided. It was the smallest possible thing. Paul says the coming of Christ is not some gradual process that will take a long time to work out. It's going to be as fast as you can split the atom. In a moment.

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In case anyone is in doubt as to the suddenness, he adds another phrase—“in the twinkling of an eye.” As quick as it takes you to throw a glance to someone else, just that quick. So will be the coming of the Lord.

Therefore, when we face death, we face it with the assuredness of the victory that’s coming. The graveside, which is now a place of defeat, in that future moment—at that last trump—is going to be swallowed up in a fantastic victory. I like to imagine what it’s going to be like on resurrection day. I know that God can materialize the body by storing all the atomic structure on an electronic signal. But I can of think, just for illustrative purposes, that God is going to pop open the graves of all Christians, and gravestones are going to lie in smithereens all over the place, in order to demonstrate what is happening. What has been a field of defeat will be, in the age to come, a field of victory.

Paul is always practical. When it comes right down to it he wants to move us into the present moment and say, what does all this coming victory mean for the here and now? There are two means for the here and now.

One meaning applies to us when we go through death. The other meaning applies to us as we live out our life. “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 15:55–57, NIV). Here, when we go to our own graveside and face our own death, if the Lord doesn’t come, we’re to console ourselves with these words—verses 55–57—realizing that death has lost its sting for us.

It seems to me that verse 56 is somewhat confusing. When Paul goes on to say, “The sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the law,” it almost doesn’t seem to fit. There’s a powerful meaning there.

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Why is it that I am afraid of a bee but not of a ladybug? I like what bees do. The bees keep wanting to build a hive inside our sanctuary wall. We scare them away, but no matter how many times they keep coming back. Look closely. There is honey coming out of the top of the church. That's spiritually symbolic. God wants to remind us that honey was coming out of this body. That's beautiful. That's what church ought to be—honey must be coming out.

I like what bees do, but I don't appreciate a bee flitting around me. Why don't I treat a bee like a ladybug? Because a bee has a stinger. A ladybug doesn't. If the bee didn't have the stinger, I wouldn't be afraid of him.

What Paul is saying is that, for the Christian, death has lost its sting. It's stinger has been taken away. What was the stinger of death? Sin. What is it like to die with sin still present in our life? To die unforgiven, to die without Christ's atonement applied to our life, to die without salvation? To die without redemption is an awful thing. I cannot describe to you what it's like to come to the graveside of someone concerning whom genuine doubts exist as to whether or not they've ever given their life to Christ. Death has a powerful sting in those moments.

Paul goes on to say that the law is the power of sin, or the power of sin is the law. If you try to get rid of the sin question by being good and doing the work of the law, you're going to find that sin has a stronghold in the law. The law keeps telling you, "You cannot do all that God wants you to do." And you are guilty before Him. The sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the law. But Christ has freed us both from the law and from sin. Christ has done what the law could not do. He has forgiven us our trespasses and put us in right relationship with God. Therefore, we have a present victory. Death has lost its sting. Because of Christ.

Therefore, in the midst of death, we have a word of hope. In the midst of life, we have a word of hope. "Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves

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fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Watch that word “therefore” when Paul uses it. He is a debater, a logistician. “Therefore” is a very important word in debates. It means that everything that has come before is leading to this key, pivotal point. Now there is a consequence. It’s taken Paul 57 verses to come to “Therefore.” Now he’s ready for the punch line, the bottom line—“Therefore.” What is the implication of the teaching on the resurrection? Of Christ’s resurrection, ours. What is it all leading to?

“Therefore.” There’s an application for us, in the midst of life. We are being called upon, in view of the resurrection, to stability. We have our feet on solid ground. We’re to keep at our posts. Stand firm. Not desert the sentry position that God has given us in His army. We’re to always abound in the work of the Lord.

I like that because some of us do Christian service as “Let’s just get it done.” Maybe we even walk off before we get it done. But this describes an abounding person. Always abounding in the work of the Lord. The word that Paul uses here, by the way—“for your labor in the Lord is not in vain”—“labor” connotes the idea of “sweat.” That someone has put himself to considerable effort. I love the balance here. On the one hand, Paul is saying the stronghold of sin is the law and we’re never justified on the basis of our works. But then he turns right around and says that because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we’re going to work like crazy for the King. If there is one regret that I’ll have in heaven—without living in a guilt trip all of my life—but I think that if I could isolate one regret, when I stand before the Lord, I’d have the tendency to say, “Lord, it’s so wonderful. I just wish I had done more for You when I had the chance.”

Always abounding in the work of the Lord. Do you ever feel like your life is going nowhere? That it’s useless? That it’s one twenty-four-hour day after another, and one is not too different

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from the other? Because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, your labor is not in vain. Nothing we do is in vain. He has swallowed up our life in victory; what we do has meaning and purpose.

Closing Prayer

Gracious heavenly Father, we praise You for the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We praise You for the resurrection which awaits our body. Lord, there are key moments in our life that when we face them, bring to us such a tremendous sense of anticipation and fear. We think, Lord, of the young people preparing for marriage. How they anticipate their wedding. We think, Lord, of how each of us are moving toward an undetermined time in our life where, unless You come, we ourselves will be placed in the ground. It's a moment that's both terrible and awful, but because of Christ, hopeful. What we shall be is not yet apparent. But we know that because of the transition our bodies will go through, we shall be like You. I want to thank You today for the solid ground You put under our feet. I want to pray for myself and everyone else here, that we'll be the kind of Christians that live for You in such a way that we joyfully serve You. That instead of looking at the work You've called us to do—with our families and work and the ministries within this body—and wondering if what we're doing is worthwhile, if we could do anything at all, if we can really somehow be of use to You, that we could leap past all of that and realize that it is in You, that our labor is not in vain. How we minister to the children and the young people in our midst. How we care about what we do is important, because it's not in vain. I think of the testimony of the minister I heard this past week who is now in a place doing a great work for You, who as a young boy was left fatherless. An older man, there at the gravesite, vowed before You that he would be that young boy's father and care for that boy and love him. And how that young boy came to be a powerful vessel in Your hands. I think, Lord, of how, when we care about another person in our family or in this church body or anywhere, we're not sowing seeds to

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the wind. We're planting them in the ground. We're planting love, we're planting hope. And there will be a harvest. Our labor in the Lord is not in vain. Help each of us to see our lives as not just this vain thing, but as purposeful and hope-filled and God-filled through Christ. Amen.