

“A Perfect 10” (1 Corinthians 15:35-49)

What gives a widow courage as she stands beside a fresh grave? Why would anyone who is disabled be encouraged when they think of life after death? How can we see past the martyrdom of believers in the persecuted church? Where do the thoughts of young couples go when they lose their baby? What is God’s final answer to pain and suffering in this world?

The answer to each of these questions is the same: the hope of bodily resurrection. We draw strength from this truth almost every day of our lives...more than we realize. It becomes the mental glue that holds our otherwise shattered thoughts together. Impossible though it may be for us to understand the details of how God is going to pull it off, we hang our hopes on the fragile threadlike thought, “Someday, He will make it right, and thank God, all this will change.”

Yet, for many Christians death is disturbing. Maybe you share the sentiments of Woody Allen who states, “It’s not that I’m afraid to die, I just don’t want to be there when it happens.” Like Allen, if we are honest we would have to acknowledge that death is difficult, at best. However, in 1 Cor 15:35-49, Paul declares, “*When we die we have truly begun to live.*” In these fifteen verses, we will learn two resurrection realities that will prepare us for our eternal existence.

1. The bodily resurrection is familiar and unique (15:35-41). Throughout chapter 15 Paul argued strongly for the resurrection of the body, but he knows his teaching will spur two questions: how will God resurrect our bodies and what does a resurrection body look like? He now turns to answer these questions posed in 15:35 by a hypothetical objector: “**But someone will say, ‘How are the dead raised? And with what kind of body¹ do they come?’**”² I’m sure you have wondered, as I have, how God will resurrect people out of the dirt. I still haven’t figured out how God will put all those molecules back together again. For example, if someone died at sea and sailors buried him, a fish might eat his body. The atoms and molecules of his body would become part of the fish. If a fisherman caught and ate the fish, its body would become part of the fisherman’s body. If the fisherman died and an undertaker buried him in the ground and someone eventually sowed wheat over his grave, the fisherman’s atoms and molecules would go into the wheat. A third person would eat the wheat and so on. How could the first person’s body ever come together again?³

The quick response to this dilemma is if God is God, He can easily resurrect the humans He created.⁴ If someone can explain to me how God constructed man out of dust in the first place, I will tell you how He will reconstruct us out of it. To put together someone who has disintegrated might be a problem for us, but not for God. Since God created Adam from dirt, He won’t have a problem reassembling the dead from it.⁵ The resurrection of our bodies does not depend upon us understanding how God will do it. When we grasp the fact that nothing is impossible with God, resurrection becomes simple. Absolutely nothing, including raising the dead, is too difficult for God (Jer 32:17). God created the universe out of nothing, so resurrecting people out of dust is minor-league for Him (Heb 11:3).⁶

Of course, not everyone will accept this biblical argument. Paul anticipated the objection of someone arguing against the idea of a bodily resurrection. In 15:36, he calls such a person a “**fool.**” The Bible defines a “fool” as someone who fails to take God into account. Such a person excludes God from consideration.⁷ Remember, if God is God bodily resurrection is absolutely no problem!⁸ Paul would definitely argue, *when we die we have truly begun to live.*

In his retort, Paul uses an analogy from nature to get his point across. He writes in 15:36-38: “**You fool! That which you sow does not come to life unless it dies; and that which you sow, you do not sow the body which is to be, but a bare grain, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body just as He wished, and to each of the seeds a body of its own.**”

Paul calls this hypothetical person a “fool” for not recognizing a simple fact of nature that can be observed every day. Basically, Paul is saying, “Somebody bring this guy some wheat seeds and remind him how wheat kernels grow and produce grain. They have to be planted in the ground and die in order for the new life of the grain to grow.” Honestly, choose almost any fruit, vegetable, or grain and you can see the body that grows out of the ground is very different from the “body” that was planted. Compare a pumpkin seed with a pumpkin or an orange seed with an orange. Paul is not talking about the appearance of our resurrection bodies in terms of whether we will be recognizable. His point is the body that is planted in death is not the same body that is resurrected.⁹ When a seed is buried in the ground, a plant, not another seed, comes out of the seed. The plant does not look like the seed it came from. Likewise, when we are buried in the ground and resurrected, our bodies will not look identical to the ones we have now.¹⁰

In 15:39-41, Paul expands his argument by describing the unique nature of various “bodies.” He answers the question: how are the earthly sphere and heavenly sphere bridged?¹¹ In 15:39, he writes, “**All flesh is not the same flesh, but there is one flesh of men, and another flesh of beasts, and another flesh of birds, and another of fish.**” These four different types of “flesh” also appear in the created order in Genesis but in the reverse of how they appear in here: “Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth” (Gen. 1:20); “let the land produce living creatures ... livestock ... and wild animals” (1:24); and “let us make man in our image” (1:26). Such a view is derived from Paul’s view of the Old Testament.¹² In this context, the “flesh” of men is made for walking, that of birds for flying, and that of fish for swimming. God designs bodies to fit the environment they will live in. Our resurrection bodies will be perfect for the environment of heaven. Earthly bodies equip us to live on earth. We breathe the earth’s oxygen, drink its water, and eat its fruit. However, these earthly bodies aren’t suitable for heaven. To get us ready for the next world they must undergo a change. *When we die we have truly begun to live.*

Paul continues his argument in 15:40-41 by stating, “**There are also heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one, and the glory of the earthly is another. 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.**” Earthly bodies will pale in comparison to heavenly bodies. Heavenly bodies are glorious! There is a huge difference in brightness between a twenty-five watt light bulb and a 1000-watt light bulb. In the resurrection, our “lumens” of brightness will be turned up to the fullest. Our resurrection bodies will literally shine with brightness (Dan 12:3; Matt 13:43). This passage could mean that there will be differing degrees of brightness in our glorified bodies. Or perhaps it refers to the difference in glory between our natural and resurrection bodies. I opt for an allusion to the former. In light of the emphasis throughout 1 Corinthians on eternal rewards, it seems that Paul is alluding to differences in the eternal state. One thing is certain: every resurrection body will be without defect and will literally radiate brightness. Death for the Christian is not gloom but glory. *When we die we have truly begun to live.*

[Paul has just informed us that the bodily resurrection is familiar and unique. Now he will insist...]

2. The bodily resurrection is new and improved (15:42-49). In these verses, Paul contrasts the two *living* bodies—the present body and the resurrection body. Your present body was created to last only a few years. Your resurrection body will equip you for a much higher level of existence. Paul contrasted the differences between them in 15:42-44: “**So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body; 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.**” At the resurrection, our bodies will be transformed from our current “caterpillar” form to our future “butterfly” status. The beauty of a butterfly is far superior to that of a caterpillar, but the butterfly has to go through the transformation process first. Four changes must take place to transform your body from earthly to heavenly.

Change #1: Perishable to Imperishable (15:42). Our present bodies are perishable, and they degenerate as we race toward the grave. Just like Adam we are headed back to dust. In the resurrection, however, we will be raised imperishable, never to deteriorate or die again. In heaven no one will comment on your age or notice the years are beginning to take their toll. You will look as young a billion years from now as you will a thousand years from now.

Sir Michael Faraday, one of England's greatest chemists and physicists, reportedly heard a student scoff at the idea of the resurrection. Faraday threw a silver goblet into a jar of acid, which completely dissolved it. He then added other chemicals that caused the silver to settle to the bottom of the jar. The chemists then took the silver to a silversmith, who made it into a goblet more beautiful than the first. Then Faraday held up a goblet and told the student, "If I, an ordinary scientist, can dissolve and remake a silver goblet, why is it hard to believe that God can raise the body from the dead?"

God will transform your perishable body into one that is indestructible. Once you receive it, dying will be impossible. You will live in it throughout eternity. Truly, it can be said, although our body is perishing our spirit can be flourishing. *When we die we have truly begun to live.*

Change #2: Dishonor to Glory (15:43a). All of us come to a point in life when we look in the mirror and say, "Mirror, mirror on the wall—you've got to be kidding!" There is a sense in which our bodies are "dishonorable." But God promises that we will be raised in glory. When a body is transported to a funeral home, it is always covered by a sheet to shield gaping eyes from the dishonor of looking upon the corpse. Every dead body is a reminder of our dishonor, a reminder that we are but frail.

I would like you to do something very carefully: look out of the corner of your eye at the person to the right of you. Don't do it obviously☺. Are you aware that the person you are looking at is terminally ill? Now take a quick look at the person to the left of you. That person also is terminally ill. The reality is that the person sitting between the person to the right of you and the left of you is also terminally ill. Some of us who are younger will be gone before some of us who are older. That's simply the way it is. Yet we live in denial.

Change #3: Weakness to Power (15:43b). Have you ever noticed everyone wants to live long, but no one wants to grow old? It is true. As my dad says, "Growing old is no fun." If you want proof, just consider the five B's of middle age: baldness, bifocals, bridges, bulges, and bunions. Nothing works right. Our bodies wear out, slow down, decay, sag, groan, and even begin to smell bad. We brag about our strength but a tiny microbe can kill us. Sooner or later, we grow old and our bodies begin to break down. Eventually, they stop working altogether. No amount of Vitamin C or Siberian Ginseng can change that fact. At best, we can only slow down the aging process; we cannot delay it forever.¹³

If you are like me, you probably have one part of your body (or maybe several parts) that you would like to change. Maybe it's your weight, your height, your hair, or something about your face. To make it worse, our culture bombards us daily with images of beautiful, well-built people. But in heaven, there will be no fad diets, no Weight Watchers, no aerobics, no exercise bikes, no personal trainers, no physical therapists, no stair masters, no weight rooms, no saunas, no jogging tracks, no low-fat foods, no diet drinks, and no plastic surgeons. God will give every one of His children a glorious, unique, diverse, perfect new body at the resurrection that will never fail or disappoint them.¹⁴

Fortunately, our resurrection bodies will be extremely powerful. We will never grow weary or weak. Can you imagine not having to sleep throughout all eternity? Since there will be no need to nap, we will never again have to toss and turn on lumpy mattresses. Wives will not have to listen to their husband snoring anymore. No more insomnia, sleeping pills, or alarm clocks, either. Our way of life will be radically different than our lifestyles here on earth.¹⁵

Change #4: Natural to Spiritual. When Paul states that our resurrection bodies will be spiritual, he does not mean like Casper the friendly ghost. This refers to the type of body we will have.¹⁶ When the disciples saw Jesus after He was resurrected, they thought they had seen a ghost. Jesus assured them, “A spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have” (Luke 24:39). Jesus did not become a spirit, but was raised with a spiritual body. In heaven we will not be “spirits,” but we will have spiritual bodies. After Jesus died and rose from the dead, He didn’t have two bodies, one natural and another spiritual. He had one body—a natural body that had been transformed into a virtual body.¹⁷ Jesus showed His disciples the marks of the nails in His hands and feet and the wounds in His side that proved it was the same body. That body had undergone a radical change. Similarly, when you are resurrected your body also will be changed and perfected.

If you watch infomercials or read magazines you will see astounding “Before-and-After” photographs. The question is: how did this happen? Obviously, exercise and diet are capable of transforming individuals. Yet, the same person exists in the revolutionized earth suit. Moreover, I like to believe that this indicates our resurrection bodies will be so wonderful and glorious that it will be exactly what we’ve always dreamed of in a body. It will never disappoint us.

In 15:45-49, Paul draws comparisons between Adam and Jesus.¹⁸ In this section, he argues that there is a difference between earthy and spiritual bodies. Verse 45 begins like this: **“So also it is written, ‘The first MAN, Adam, BECAME A LIVING SOUL.’ The last Adam became a life-giving spirit.”** The first Adam was merely “a living human being.” By emphatic contrast, the last Adam is not merely “living,” but “life-giving.”¹⁹ Paul’s point is: Christ gives life through His resurrection. Have you believed this simple truth? If you have not believed in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, please do so today.

Paul concludes this passage with these words: **“However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural; then the spiritual.”²⁰ The first man is from the earth, earthy; the second man is from heaven. As is the earthy, so also are those who are earthy; and as is the heavenly, so also are those who are heavenly. Just as we have borne the image of the earthy, we will also bear the image of the heavenly.”** I am so glad that Paul made these last four verses so simple. His argument is: the heavenly is greater than the earthy. But in order to experience the heavenly body, one must first live in the earthy body.

A woman was diagnosed with a terminal illness and had been given three months to live. As she was getting her things in order, she contacted her pastor and asked him to come to her house to discuss some of her final wishes. She told him which songs she wanted sung at her funeral service, what Scriptures she would like read, and what outfit she wanted to be buried in. She requested to be buried with her favorite Bible. As the pastor prepared to leave, the woman suddenly remembered something else. “There’s one more thing,” she said excitedly. “What’s that?” said the pastor. “This is important,” the woman said. “I want to be buried with a fork in my right hand.”

The pastor stood looking at the woman, not knowing quite what to say. The woman explained. “In all my years of attending church socials and potluck dinners, when the dishes of the main course were being cleared, someone would inevitably lean over and say, ‘Keep your fork. The best is yet to come.’ It was my favorite part of the meal because I knew something better was coming like velvety chocolate cake or deep-dish apple pie. So, when people see me in that casket with a fork in my hand and they ask, ‘What’s with the fork?’ I want you to tell them, ‘The best is yet to come!’”²¹

This elderly woman got it right! The best is yet to come for *when we die we have truly begun to live.*

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Scripture Reference

1 Corinthians 15:35-49

Leviticus 23:9-14

Romans 8:18-27

2 Corinthians 5:1-2

Philippians 3:20-21

1 John 3:2

John 21:19, 26

Study Questions

1. In what specific ways have I struggled with thoughts pertaining to death, resurrection, and the afterlife (15:35)? Have my difficulties been theological, philosophical, emotional, practical, or all of the above? When (if ever) have I talked to another believer about my doubts or questions? Will I talk to someone today about some of my fears or concerns?
2. How often do I reflect on God's great wisdom and power? If the doctrine of my bodily resurrection is hard for me to fathom, do I really believe that God spoke creation into existence? See the preponderance of evidence to support this fact: Genesis 1:3-28; Psalms 33:6, 9; 148:5; Isaiah 45:12; Romans 4:17; Hebrews 11:3; and 2 Peter 3:5. The prophet Jeremiah declared, "Ah Lord GOD! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and by Your outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for You" (Jeremiah 32:17). Can I honestly say that I am placing my confidence in this truth?
3. What do I like least about my physical body? Do I have a physical, mental, or emotional handicap that prevents me from achieving my full potential? What does it mean to me to know that one day I will have a glorified body, free from any hindrances? Is it possible that God is using my handicap to help me to be homesick for heaven?
4. How will the knowledge of my future resurrected body influence my thinking and living in the present? When bodily creaks, wrinkles, aches, pains, and groans begin to consume me, what kind of attitude will I adopt? Read Romans 8:18-30 and 2 Corinthians 4:16-18. How can my contentment and joy have a profound impact upon others? Can I teach others not merely to live well, but to suffer and die well?
5. When I reflect upon the fleeting nature of this life, how will I use my time, talents, treasure, and the truth of God's Word to impart blessing to others? In light of eternity, what really matters? How would I like to be remembered at my funeral? How can I live such a life now?

Notes

¹ The term "body" (*soma*) does not appear in 1 Cor 15:1-34; however, it appears ten times in this section.

² It is a little strange that any Christian should be skeptical about resurrection. Fee surmises, "The Corinthians are convinced that by the gift of the Spirit, and especially the manifestation of tongues, they have already entered into the spiritual, 'heavenly' existence that is to be. Only the body, to be sloughed off at death, lies between them and their ultimate spirituality. Thus they have denied the body in the present, and have no use for it in the future." Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 778.

³ Thomas L. Constable: *Notes on 1 Corinthians*: 2007 edition:

<http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/1corinthians.pdf>, 176.

⁴ When Paul stood before King Agrippa he said, "Why is it considered incredible among you people if God does raise the dead?" (Acts 26:8) If such a question could be asked of an unbelieving King of the Jews, how much less sense does it make for a Christian to have doubts about the resurrection?

⁵ God created Adam out of the dust of the ground (Gen 3:19). Eventually, his body deteriorated back to dust. How is it possible to reconstruct people from dust? We might find it easy to believe that Jesus was resurrected because all His "parts" were still attached. Although He had been dead for three days, He had not disintegrated into dust like someone who has been dead for 3,000 years.

⁶ Kent Crockett, *Making Today Count for Eternity* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2001), 92.

⁷ The word "fool" (*aphron*) is used in Ps 92:6 to refer to evildoers who have no knowledge of God and His ways. Paul uses a form of this word without the alpha privative to denote a truly wise person (1 Cor 10:15).

⁸ This past week, a technical breakthrough has enabled scientists to create for the first time dozens of cloned embryos from adult monkeys, raising the prospect of the same procedure being used to make cloned human embryos. Steve Connor, Science Editor, "Cloning: A Giant Step," *Science & Tech* 11/12/2007: http://news.independent.co.uk/sci_tech/article3152325.ece.

⁹ Tony Evans, *The Best is Yet to Come* (Chicago: Moody, 2000), 134-135.

¹⁰ Paul's analogy makes the point that the only way for a new resurrected body to grow was for the old body to be buried in the ground in death. Unless the seed is buried, the grain will never grow. Death is required for new life to appear. What is true of seeds is also true of our physical bodies that God has created. And what is true in the physical realm is also true in the spiritual—death brings forth life (John 12:24). Christ had to die so you and I could live.

¹¹ David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 730.

¹² David W.J. Gill, "1 Corinthians" in Clinton E. Arnold, *Zondervan Illustrated Biblical Background Commentary: Vol 3 Romans to Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 180.

¹³ Ray Pritchard, "Acorns to Oak Trees: How Are the Dead Raised?" (1Cor 15:35-58): <http://www.calvarymemorial.com/sermons/htm/2000/000702.htm>.

¹⁴ Mark Hitchcock, *101 Answers to the Most Asked Questions about the End Times* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2001), 254-255.

¹⁵ Crockett, *Making Today Count for Eternity*, 97.

¹⁶ In this context, "spiritual body" can also mean a body subject to the human spirit, not to our fleshly desires.

¹⁷ The resurrection body is not subject to material forces. Remember how Christ came through closed doors after the resurrection. Keep in mind that the reason the Angel rolled the stone from the tomb was not to let Christ out, but to let the disciples in.

¹⁸ On Adam/Christ comparisons in Paul see Rom 5:12-19 and James D.G. Dunn *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Cambridge, UK, 1998), 199-204, 208-12 and 241-42.

¹⁹ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1283.

²⁰ A sedimentary rock that is subjected to heat and pressure becomes a metaphoric rock. It is the same rock, but it has undergone a change. In the same way, your resurrection body will be the same one you have now, but it will have gone through a transformation. The spiritual body is derived from the natural body. This is why we must live in our earthly bodies first (15:46). Crockett, *Making Today Count for Eternity*, 99.

²¹ Preaching Today citation: submitted by Brett Kays.