THE GLORY OF THE RESURRECTION

1 Corinthians 15:35–58

Key Verse: 15:49

“And just has we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man.”

Have you ever really thought about what’s going to happen to your body? We may try to eat right, exercise and get enough sleep, but in the long run, what’s going to happen? We don’t really know. An illness could bring radical changes to our bodies. An accident could cripple or maim us. The natural aging process will likely bring more and more aches and pains, and greater and greater weakness. We don’t like to think about it, but after we die, our bodies are going to start decomposing. Does it matter? We can’t do anything about it anyway. Some think our bodies are like a trap, and don’t really matter. But in today’s passage we find that our bodies *do* matter. Why? Because God has a plan to raise our bodies from the dead and totally change them. What will our new bodies be like? It there any other meaning to it? And how should this impact our lives now? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living word today.

As we’ve seen so far in this chapter, the historic, bodily resurrection of Jesus is the gospel, the good news. Paul has shown us that our Lord Jesus’ resurrection was according to the Scriptures (e.g. Mt12:4; Jnh1:17; Ps16:8–11; 110), had many eyewitnesses (5–8), and was absolutely necessary (12–19). The bodily resurrection of Jesus reveals God’s almighty power to raise not only him but us also (6:14). It’s a power not just for the future but for the here and now. It’s the power to forgive all our sins and make us alive spiritually, with a new life purpose (3,17,22; Ro6:4,11; Eph2:5,6,10). It proves God’s promise that our Lord Jesus will come again and give us his kingdom (24; 1Pe1:3,4). It assures us that suffering for the gospel is meaningful (18,19,30–32a). In this messed-up world it gives us the conviction that our Lord Jesus is reigning now and one day he will conquer all God’s enemies, including death itself (25,26). We’re all immersed in an unbelieving world where people live for momentary pleasure. But we should not be misled. We need to hold firmly to our resurrection faith and hope in Jesus.

Now in this last part of the chapter Paul turns to the actual matter of our resurrection body. In verses 35–41 he shows us illustrations from nature. In verses 42–44 he tells us how different our resurrection bodies will be. In verses 45–49 he contrasts what we received from Adam and what we will receive from our Lord Jesus. In verses 50–57 he describes the day when our Lord Jesus Christ will raise all who believed in him and give them the victory. In the last verse Paul tells us how to live with resurrection faith and hope practically.

Read verse 35. Paul has been explaining but now he anticipates further questions. At first these may seem like good questions. But right after mentioning them, Paul says, “How foolish!” (36a) He’s not just shooting down all questions. Why are these questions foolish? Though they sound reasonable, they’re based on unbelief. In fact, they’re cynical and sarcastic: “*How* are the dead raised? With what kind of *body* will they come?” Paul knew some people were mocking the whole notion of the resurrection. They thought a dead body coming out of the grave was a horrible idea, like *The Walking Dead,* or a bunch of zombies.

Paul goes on to explain: “What you sow does not come to life unless it dies” (36b). As we know, seeds planted in the ground don’t grow unless they “die” first. If, after planting a seed, we wait a while, then dig it up and find that it’s exactly the same seed planted, we know there’s not going to be any plant. It’s a spiritual principle as well: no death, no resurrection; no suffering, no glory. Our natural tendency is to avoid suffering and death. But if we try to live a suffering-free life focused on self-preservation, we won’t bear any fruit (Jn12:24).

But Paul’s main point here is more simple: he’s just trying to show that the plant that grows from a seed is very different from it. Read verses 37,38. The emphasis here is on God. We don’t control the outcome of what happens to seeds; God does. God in his own wisdom and will determines what kind of new body any kind of seed will have. These days, despite grave ethical warnings, some people are trying to use genetic engineering to produce designer babies of a particular gender that are disease free, strong and gorgeous, just as in Aldous Huxley’s famous novel *Brave New World* (1932). But I suspect God will have the final say in what the outcome of this really is. God is still the Creator, the Author of life and Sovereign Ruler of all things. He ultimately determines what comes from all seeds, and ultimately, he’s the one who gives life. To understand the resurrection body, we need first to start thinking about who God is. Every day in the world around us God produces the miracle of life from all kinds of seeds. He produces trees, bushes, flowers, vegetables and fruit from seeds. Up close, each kind of plant is a wonder and a fascinating creation that reveals God’s glory.

God also uses seeds to produce all kinds of creatures. Read verse 39. All these creatures also came from tiny seeds: fish, birds, animals and humans. But Paul is especially emphasizing how *different* their *bodies* are. The body of a fish is very different from the body of a bird. The body of a bird is very different from the body of a tiger. The body of a tiger is very different from the body of a child. Paul goes on. Read verse 40. Here Paul zooms out to help us consider the larger scale of creation. “Heavenly bodies” are what we see in the sky; “earthly bodies” are what we see on earth, perhaps great mountains, canyons and seas. They are much larger in scale and exist much longer than plants or animals. And in this verse Paul begins using the word “splendor.” In Greek this word can mean “magnificence” or “majesty.” When we see Niagara Falls, or the Grand Canyon, or the Rocky Mountains, we get a vivid picture of this magnificence or majesty. And then, when we turn our eyes to the sky, we see heavenly bodies which God also created, each with its own magnificence. Read verse 41. A sunrise, a sunset, a full moon, a splash of stars each has its own majesty and glory. These days there’s much less air pollution, so I heard that at night people have started going outside to look at the sky, and they’re seeing more stars than they’ve ever seen before. How amazing that each star has its own splendor or glory!

Why is Paul describing all this? First of all, he wants us to consider the power of God in creation (Ro1:20). God who made all these bodies—plants, creatures, heavenly and earthly bodies, each with its own splendor—will have no trouble raising the dead. Secondly, Paul wants us to consider how creative and glorious God is. God created not just one kind but all kinds of plants, all kinds of fish, all kinds of birds, all kinds of animals, all kinds of humans. He created all kinds of beauty in nature, and all kinds of stars in the sky. God loves to endow each of his creations with his own majesty and glory. Likewise, God wants to give each of us a resurrection body with a splendor and glory beyond our imagination.

Paul then applies it. Read verses 42–44. Our bodies now are in some ways just the opposite of what they’re going to be. Right now we’re kind of like flowers: we bud and blossom and are gorgeous when we’re young, then we gradually fade as we get older. But even after we’ve died and decayed, we’ll be raised to be imperishable, glorious, powerful and spiritual forever. What should this mean to us? 2 Corinthians 5:5–7 says, “Now the one who has fashioned us for this very purpose is God, who has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come. Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. For we live by faith, not by sight.” We tend to live by sight, but with resurrection faith we can always be confident, even in the face of our physical weaknesses and limitations. With resurrection faith we have the sure hope to be with our Lord Jesus someday, with an imperishable, powerful, glorious, spiritual resurrection body.

Then Paul changes the subject. Read verse 45. Here he contrasts the first Adam with the last Adam, Jesus. When God created him, Adam became a living being. We all are alive and have a physical body because we’re descended from the first man, Adam. But when God raised Jesus from the dead, he made him “a life-giving spirit.” Jesus gives us spiritual life now, through the Spirit, and eternal life after death, because he’s going to give us new resurrection bodies that will live forever. In verse 46 Paul emphasizes that the natural body came first, through Adam, and only through Jesus will the spiritual body come. Why? It was because some of these people thought they were spiritual already due to their human wisdom (2:5,10–3:1). Paul continues his contrast. Read verse 47. Adam was made from the dust of the earth. He was so earth-bound, so weak. But Jesus came from heaven. What does it mean? Read verse 48. We can be like either the earthly man or the heavenly man. When we live without resurrection faith, we’re like the earthly man Adam. Not only are we weak and earthbound, but also, we sin, and we have to live with the consequences—guilt, shame and fear. We have to live apart from God, fending for ourselves in this cursed world struggling to survive, only to end up dying in the end. It’s so meaningless.

But when we believe in Jesus who died and rose again, we’re born again by the Holy Spirit. Now, like Jesus our Lord, we are “of heaven.” It means our hopes are changed, from earthbound, worldly, narrow-minded, petty, selfish hopes, to hope in God’s kingdom and God’s greater purposes. When we’re “of heaven” like our Lord Jesus, we can see life and the world from God’s point of view. When we’re “of heaven” like our Lord Jesus, we’re on mission to bring the good news to perishing people during our lifetime. Now life has meaning and purpose and we can live with a new heart and a new passion to do God’s will.

Read verse 49. Here the word “image” means a lot. Of course, in some ways we look like Adam, just like we look a bit like our parents. But to “bear the image of the earthly man” is more than physical. “Image” also can mean “character.” We all inherited a sinful nature from Adam. Our sinful nature, frankly, makes us ugly, no matter how good we may look outwardly. With the image of the earthly man we’re proud. We’re disobedient and rebellious. We’re enslaved to our physical passions. We’re selfish. We do things harmful to others and even to ourselves. With the image of the earthly man we’re destined to fail. The more we struggle against our sinful nature, the more we find we can’t escape (Ro7).

But because Jesus is risen, God promises us that we will “bear his image,” we’ll become more and more like him. But it’s not a physical likeness. Through his resurrection power God will gradually transform us and we’ll grow in the character of Jesus. We’ll learn his tenderness and compassion. We’ll learn his humility. We’ll learn his obedience to God. We’ll learn his faith. No matter how ugly we were in the past due to our sins, God can conform us to the likeness of his Son (Ro8:29). This promise to bear the image of the heavenly man only resonates with people who are struggling to follow Jesus. When we try to serve God, we can despair because our motives are so impure, and our character is still so unchanged. But this promise of God gives us hope to keep struggling.

In verses 50–57 Paul describes how God will raise the dead. We have to be changed and receive a resurrection body that is without sin and death so that we can inherit God’s kingdom (50). But no matter how much we try to describe the resurrection, actually it will be mysterious. It also will happen very fast, in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye. When our Lord Jesus comes again there will be the sounding of a trumpet, and then, whether dead or alive, all people will be changed and have a resurrection body. Finally, death will be swallowed up in victory. No matter how gorgeous, how able, how powerful, all people have been stung by death. It’s because of the power of sin, and this power was riled up through the law. But through our Lord Jesus Christ God gives us the victory over sin and death. And at the resurrection, there’s going to be a great celebration and singing!

Read verse 58. This is how we live with resurrection faith. We need to resist being moved. Moved by what? By our sins, by people, by the world, by the situation around us. We need to be diligently doing the work of the Lord, which is mainly the work of helping other people believe in Jesus (Jn6:29). We can be sure our labor in the Lord is not in vain because of the resurrection of Jesus.

Read verse 49 again. May God give us this glorious hope to bear the image of the heavenly man, our Lord Jesus Christ. May God help us overcome the world and the power of death and give ourselves fully to doing his work.