

THE NEW BODY -- WHAT IS IT LIKE?

by Ray C. Stedman

We have now come to what is, for many people, the key question of Chapter 15, the great resurrection chapter of First Corinthians. The Apostle Paul says,

But some one will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?"
{1 Cor 15:35 RSV}

It is obvious that skepticism oozes from those questions. In Verse 12 of this chapter, Paul had already recognized that some among these Corinthians were saying that there is no resurrection from the dead. "We do not understand how it can happen," they were saying, "therefore, we do not believe it will happen." So these questions were expressions of that unbelief.

For twenty centuries now the skeptics of all ages have asked these same questions. Of course, they amplify them by imposing various obstacles they see. They say, for instance, "We can understand, perhaps, that a body that has been carefully embalmed and placed in a grave might possibly be brought back to life, but what about those that have been destroyed? What about all the people that have been cremated?"

Just last week a friend of mine died. His body was cremated and his ashes were taken and scattered by an airplane out over the Pacific Ocean. "How are you going to restore a body like that?" the skeptics would ask.

"What about those that are eaten by animals or by marine life? Those animals in turn have died; their bodies have returned to ashes and they have been taken up as parts of plants or other animals. How can God sort it all out?"

These questions always arise when unbelief faces this question of the resurrection of the dead. "How can it be?" That is what some of these Corinthians were asking. The clear implication was, "It cannot be; it is impossible." The Greeks, of course, were teaching that it was a good thing, an advantage, to lose the body. The body was a prison-house, they taught, where we are limited and restricted. The Oriental religions, on the other hand, were teaching that many bodies were needed in a process of salvation, that you return to earth many times. Their question would be, "Which body is raised from the dead? Is it the 'cow' body you once had, or the 'gorilla' body you may have had, or the one you are walking around in now?" Reincarnation would, for them, pose an entirely different question concerning the resurrection of the body.

Well, Paul now answers these two questions the skeptics were asking, "How are the dead raised?" and, "With what kind of body do they come?"

His answer to the first question is in Verses 36-38:

You foolish man! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body which is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body.
{1 Cor 15:36-38 RSV}

Notice what he is saying:

First, "To ask how this can be is a foolish question," he says. Why did he say that? It is a normal question, almost everybody asks it, and yet Paul immediately brands it as a foolish question. The reason, of course, is evident in what he says next. It is foolish, he says, because everywhere around you are examples of what is happening in resurrection. He is referring to the normal process of plants growing from seeds or bulbs that are placed in the ground. They die, they lose their consistency, and out of them emerges another kind of body

which is yet identical to the seed that was placed in the ground.

I do not think it is any accident at all that Easter comes in the height of the spring season. We do not know when our Lord was born -- Christmas is a debatable date -- but there is no question about the date of Easter. For centuries it has been pegged to the movements of the moon, and tied to the ancient Jewish celebration of the Passover, so that everyone knows, without a shadow of a doubt, that Easter Sunday is indeed the very day that our Lord rose from the dead. Easter, therefore, always falls in the midst of the awakening of earth from its death in winter and the coming to life again of things that once were dead. Thus Paul is pointing out that we have ample evidence in the processes of nature itself to believe in a resurrection of the body.

Nature teaches us two obvious lessons.

First: Death is a necessary part of the process. Far from being an obstacle to resurrection, death is essential to it. You can put that in the form of an axiom: Nothing that has never died shall ever be raised from the dead. Obviously if it is going to be raised from the dead it has to die. Therefore, death is not an obstacle to resurrection. It is an ingredient of it and necessary to it. To balk at the fact that people die and the body loses its ability to function and its form and consistency as a body, ought never to be any hindrance to believing that life will emerge from it. The body must die just as the seed must die.

The second lesson that nature teaches us is this: The body that emerges from the seed that dies is different from the one that was planted. Put a grain of wheat or a kernel of corn into the ground and what comes up? Another grain of wheat or another kernel? No! What comes up is a green stem which does not look at all like what you put into the ground. Nevertheless it is tied to it; it is continuous from it; it has an identity with it. There is an undeniable tie with that which you put into the ground, and yet it is not the same; it is the "same" without being similar. Now, if you had never seen that process before, would you have believed it if somebody had said that *that* is what would happen? You would have looked at him as though he were mad and said, "How can that be?" because you can put almost anything else into the ground and that will not happen. It is one of those miracles that is so familiar to us that we miss the miraculous part of it. But Paul says it happens so frequently there should therefore be no struggle with believing in the resurrection of the dead.

On the occasion reported in the book of Acts where Paul is defending himself before King Agrippa, he says to the king, "Why should it be thought a thing incredible that God should raise the dead?" {cf, Acts 26:8}. And why should it, when we have the testimony of nature all around that this kind of thing can and does happen? If it was not incredible in the 1st century how much more should it be believable today, when, by the efforts of science, we know a great deal more about the processes of transferring energy and of retaining life. We are now familiar with a process called "cloning." Scientists say that it is possible to take a single cell of the human body, any cell, it does not have to be a sex cell, and by a process now known in theory, though not yet in practice, to restore that body completely as a human being. Why then should it be thought incredible that God can do it, that all he needs is a single cell from a body to restore the body exactly as it was? Man can do it; surely God will catch up with man one of these days.

Some of the other things that science is facing as possibilities are even more remarkable and confirming of this. Dr. Dirks, who is in this congregation, is in many ways the inventor of the great electronic computers we are so familiar with. Several years ago he told me that it is possible to take the genetic structure of any human being and reduce it to an electronic signal which could then be bounced off the moon and returned to earth and reconstructed as the human being again.

If that is possible to science, surely it is possible to God. So why should there be this strange unbelief about the process of resurrection from the dead? Paul says it is foolish to talk that way when there is such a wealth of evidence from nature that this very kind of thing happens all the time.

Paul now faces the skeptics' second question, "With what kind of body do they come?" All right, supposing there is a resurrection, they said, "What is the resurrection body like? How will it differ from the one we have now?"

Paul's answer is found in the next ten verses, Verses 39 through 49. He takes it in three movements:

- First, he goes back again to the lessons which are visible in nature itself;
- Then he draws the parallel with the reality of resurrection;
- Finally, in a great theological argument, he establishes the absolute certainty that this is going to happen.

First, the lesson from nature (Verses 39-41):

For not all flesh is alike, but there is one kind for men, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. There are celestial bodies and there are terrestrial bodies; but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial 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. {1 Cor 15:39-41 RSV}

Paul is still back in the world of nature, of observable phenomena, which are designed to teach men spiritual lessons.

Here is the first truth that he brings out. All bodies are not alike. Human bodies are different from bird bodies and animal bodies are different from fish bodies. Even the very nature of their flesh is different. If you do not believe that, you are going to have difficulty when you go to a restaurant because you would order beef and they would serve you fish and you would never know the difference. But there is a visible difference. In fact, science confirms this. There is such a difference that a trained scientist can tell whether a single cell comes from a human, an animal, a bird, or a fish. This is a wonderfully truthful and accurate scientific statement of that fact.

The second part of Verse 38 suggests that this difference is a result of the inner difference of nature, or personality, that these beings have. It says, "to each kind of seed its own body." In other words there is a correspondence between what the body looks like and what the being inside is like. That is why animals have various natures. For this reason, animals are used in Scripture as symbols of corresponding qualities about human beings -- wolves are always ferocious and dangerous, sheep are always helpless and needing protection, and pigs are always dirty. All these qualities are there because God wants to demonstrate to us truth about ourselves that we see reflected in the natural world. This is a great truth which I have not time to enlarge upon here.

The second thing the apostle says is there are two major divisions of bodies, Verse 40:

There are celestial bodies and there are terrestrial bodies; but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another. {1 Cor 15:40 RSV}

Now, "celestial bodies" are heavenly bodies. Paul goes on to list them -- the sun, the moon, the stars. There are also "terrestrial bodies," which are earthly bodies. He has already said what they are -- men, animals, birds, and fish. The point he makes is that there is a marked and deliberate difference between heavenly bodies and earthly bodies. Heavenly bodies shine. That is their function -- to shine, to have a glory about them. Earthly bodies, however, do not shine: They function, they articulate and coordinate in various ways. That is the glory of an earthly body.

Heavenly bodies move in limitless space, which we measure in light years, but earthly bodies are limited. They have to function within a very tightly compressed time-space sphere. Heavenly bodies control and influence and affect other things. The sun affects this planet in every way. We are dependent upon it. The moon affects us too. It controls the tides and the seasons and much of our life, in ways we hardly understand. And the stars also affect the earth. So it is the nature of heavenly bodies to control and affect; and it is the nature of an earthly body to respond, to follow, to adapt. Thus Paul is pointing out a very important distinction which nature would teach us if we had the eyes to observe.

The third thing he says here is that there is a difference in the glory of celestial bodies. 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." You

know how obviously true that is. The sun shines with a tremendous power. All of earth is dependent upon it. Solar power is far and away the greatest power known to man, and though we have only touched a fraction of its use, all energy in life, basically, comes from the sun. There is a different glory of the moon, but it has a profound effect, even upon lovers. Out together on a moonlit night they will do things they would not have done otherwise. Then the stars differ in glory. As some of you know, I have been enjoying the gift of a hot tub. While lying in it at night, studying the stars in perfect comfort, I have noticed the difference in their magnitude. Some shine brilliantly, while others are very faint and dim.

What is Paul saying about all this? Well, he is saying that all this has its parallel in the truth of the resurrection. If you would only read the lessons of nature you would have a panorama of theological truth about the resurrection spread before you. Just open your eyes and see it, he says.

So is it with the resurrection of the dead. {1 Cor 15:42a RSV}

And then he goes on to draw the parallel for us:

What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. {1 Cor 15:42b RSV}

What is there about me that is perishable? Well, it is my body. My body is losing its ability to function. It is perishing; it is decaying; it is gradually slowing down. So are your bodies. They are going to perish one of these days, so do not look at me that way! Just as the seed buried in the ground becomes a beautiful plant, so an earthly body put into the ground in death, or scattered across the oceans, will become a body designed for the heavens, an imperishable body, no longer subject to decay. That is what Paul is teaching us here.

It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. {1 Cor 15:43a RSV}

What is it about you and me that is dishonorable? Well, it is the body, isn't it?

Let me tell you a secret about mine: It sags; it groans; it even smells. When it dies it will become foul, loathsome. One of the ugly things about the story of Jonestown was what to do with those corrupting bodies that no cemetery now wants to receive. When put into the ground, or in any other way disposed of, the body ends its existence in dishonor. But it will be raised, Paul says, in glory. It will be clean, sweet, fragrant, eternally fresh, and able to function in a marvelous way.

It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. {1 Cor 15:43b RSV}

Isn't it amazing how we boast about our strength as human beings, yet just a tiny, invisible microbe can carry us away and end it all? A gnat so small you can hardly see can choke you to death. Human life is really very fragile and very easily ended. Muhammad Ali boasts that he is "the greatest," but a half-sick gorilla with one hand tied behind his back could whip him. There is nothing very impressive there. No, what you see up here, walking around before you, is a body that, Paul says, is suited to the soul:

**It is sown a physical [*soulish*, literally, not *physical*] body, it is raised a spiritual body.
{1 Cor 15:44a RSV}**

There is a "soulish" body. It is designed to function by the control of my soul -- my mind, my emotions, my will. I like to think of it as a kind of an "earth suit" designed for time, a "time suit" that I live in. It is not me. I live in it. And that is what your body is. I am standing up here wiggling the lips of my "earth suit," and you hear sounds coming out of it. You say that is me speaking to you. Well, yes, you are right. Behind the "earth suit" is me. I could not talk to you without it, but the "earth suit" is designed only for this life. It is not designed for anything else. It works fairly well in this life, but something could happen to this "earth suit" while I am talking to you and I would fall over and somebody would walk up here and say, "He's dead!" But it would not be so. I would not be dead. The "earth suit" would have died, but I would be as alive as I have ever been, and already enjoying the new body, the "heaven suit," the "eternity suit." There is also a body designed for the heavens, as well as the earth, and what the apostle is saying throughout this whole chapter is that there is a definite link between the two.

You see it so wonderfully in the resurrected body of Jesus. He rose from the dead, and yet upon his body still were the marks of crucifixion by which his apostles could be absolutely sure that it was the same Jesus in the same body. And yet what a difference! His body had been glorified, transformed. It was functioning at a different dimension and level of existence. It was able to pass through doors, able to appear and disappear, to eat or not to eat. It was able to function in fellowship with people in their "earth suits" and yet it was able to disappear from the earthly scene and still function in an "eternity suit," a "heaven suit" that God had provided for him. What a marvelous truth this is!

Now we come to the statement of certainty about it in the closing section, beginning in the middle of Verse 44. Paul argues:

If there is a physical [*soulish*] body [designed to be operated by the soul], there is also a spiritual body [designed to be operated by the spirit]. {1 Cor 15:44b RSV}

And then he proves it:

Thus it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being [soul]"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual which is first but the physical, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven. {1 Cor 15:45-49 RSV}

How certain it is! Paul says there are really only two men who have ever lived in all of history, and both of them he calls "Adam." There is the first Adam and the last Adam. Do not call him "the second Adam" because that would allow for a third and a fourth and a fifth. There are only two -- the first Adam, and the last Adam, Jesus. The only other human being to head up a race is Jesus.

The first Adam, Paul says, was made a living soul. He had a body made from the dust, and into that body of dust God himself, a Spirit, breathed a breath, and the joining together of spirit and body produced another phenomenon called the "soul," the personality. It is the presence of a spirit in a body that creates the soul and allows a person to function as a human being with mind, emotion, and will. That is what the first Adam was. Now, in the fall, the Holy Spirit that dwelt in the human spirit of Adam was withdrawn, and the human spirit was as though it was lifeless and dead. Man, therefore, was governed by his soul, the highest part of his being, which can feel and touch and taste and reason and think, but it has no contact with anything beyond and above. It is "dead in trespasses and sins," {cf, Eph 2:1}. We were all born that way. Every human being is a son or daughter of the first Adam by nature.

But then there came a last Adam. Jesus, a life-giving Spirit, came, and as a Spirit he indwells, by faith, our human spirits when we receive him, when we open up our life to him. He regenerates our human spirit, and he is now, from that vantage point within us, beginning to impart life to the soul again, to recapture the mind, the emotions and the will and bring them back under subjection to his Lordship. So we begin to experience in our life, right now, the joy of being once again in right relationship with the God who made us. He is a life-giving Spirit, and he is waiting to impart life to the "earth suit" as well and to make it into a "heaven suit," designed for the heavens.

And the order is determined by God:

... it is not the spiritual which is first {1 Cor 15:46a RSV}

The Mormon church teaches that we were once spirit beings who then came to earth and became men, but this verse flatly contradicts that. It is not the spiritual which is first, it is the physical.

We came into existence on a physical level, but designed by God, beyond that, is the spiritual. That is next, and death is but a stop in that process, and necessary to it. So now we are in a state of transition, as Paul goes on to describe,

The first man was from the earth, a man of dust [and we share that nature from Adam]; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is [notice the change of tense] the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. {1 Cor 15:47-48 RSV}

Let me ask you a question: Are you "of heaven"? Having been born into this race, part of Adam's race, have you gone on to become also a part of the Kingdom of God? Have you opened your heart to him? Have you received the Lord Jesus Christ into your human spirit so that you have the hope expressed here of becoming body, soul, and spirit, a man or woman as God intended a man or woman to be?

That is the great question of all time. Are you also of those who are "of heaven?" For the promise is,

Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust [we look and act and talk and think like Adam], we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven. {1 Cor 15:49 RSV}

I love the way John puts it. He says,

... it does not yet appear what we shall be. [The sons of God do not look any different than anybody else, do they?] But we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. {1 Jn 3:2 RSV}

What a hope!

What a difference that makes to everything in life!

It transforms the way you act, the way you think. It transforms your dreams, your aspirations, what you do with your time. Everything is changed if you are a man of heaven as well as a man of the dust.

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