

PHYSICAL FITNESS FOREVER

by Steve Zeisler

Our family vacationed in Yellowstone National Park this year during a lull in the fire season. There we saw some things that next two generations of Americans will not be able to experience due to the destruction of the forests by the devastating fires. It will be another hundred years before this beautiful area is restored to its former beauty.

Nature is a wonderful teacher. The park rangers told us that lodge pole pines will be the first of the many species of trees in the park to return following the fires. The intense heat helps to explode open the pine cones, allowing the seed to germinate and thus begin again the renewal of the forest. The rangers described how the fire would affect the animals-the moose, the herds of elk and bison, the bird population, etc. Things would be different for the animals for quite a long time following the devastation of the forest. The smoke served to cloud the heavens, blotting out the stars at night. We realized that the fires on earth had a very definite negative effect on our ability to enjoy the glory of the heavens at night in Yellowstone.

The apostle Paul utilizes three metaphors-seeds, the animal kingdom, and the heavenly bodies-in his discussion on death and resurrection in the section from First Corinthians 15, to which we come in our studies this morning. As we interact with the created world, God intends that we should think on truths which he has provided for us in the Scripture. I hope we will have the joy of discovering truth as we study this passage this morning.

BELIEF AND BEHAVIOR

The section verses 29 through 34 is somewhat set apart from the theological discussion that takes up most of 1 Corinthians 15. Last week, we studied verses 12 through 28 and discovered that the apostle confronted the Corinthians with some hard realities in order to make them see that they had allowed error to go unchallenged in their midst. A penetrating question is asked in verse 12, "Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised..." There was an insidious teaching in the Corinthian church that sought to deny the eternal link between God and man. This was the heart of the apostle's correction of their thinking. If resurrection was denied, humanity was no longer related to God; any talk of the resurrection of Christ was foolishness. "If Christ has not been raised," continued the apostle in verse 17, "your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins."

In verse 35, Paul asks another question with regard to a concern which some of the Corinthians had: "But some one will say, 'How are the dead raised? And with what kind of body do they come?' You fool!" This is a faithless question, as is evident by Paul's reply. The fact that some were ridiculing the concept of resurrection, as their question implies, demonstrates their lack of faith.

In between the questions of verses 12 and 35, which challenge false teaching, Paul speaks about some very practical matters. This is the section, verses 29 through 34, that we will look at first.

Verse 29:

Otherwise, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why then are they baptized for them? Why are we also in danger every hour? I protest, brethren, by the boasting in you, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die daily. If from human motives I fought with wild beasts at Ephesus, what does it profit me? If the dead are not raised, let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die. Do not be deceived: "Bad company corrupts good morals." Become sober-minded as you ought, and stop sinning;

for some have no knowledge of God. I speak this to your shame.

In the midst of the apostle's desire to correct their wrongheadedness, their bad theology which was undermining the gospel, he has some words to say to them concerning their behavior. If the Corinthians lost their commitment to truth, if they allowed the gospel to be denied, then right living would be impossible for them. Behavior and belief are strongly linked together, in other words.

The arrogant humanism in our own day similarly seeks to ignore and deny the truth of Scripture as the first step in undermining Christian ethics and conviction. Liberal theologians attack the Scriptures as faulty and unreliable, leaving modern social theorists, not God's Word, as the church's guide for making decisions about everything from sex to politics. So while the main concern of this chapter is the wrong things which some of the Corinthians believed, here in this section we note that increasing moral failure which is the direct result of the failure to believe what is true. This is why it is so important that evangelicals battle for the Bible lest these truths be lost; that godly scholars assert that the Bible is inerrant. Christian cults are noted for the fact that each grouping always has a dominant teacher whose job it is to restate the truth in a way that leads others astray. Belief and behavior go hand in hand.

A CALL TO COURAGE

In challenging his readers' behavior, Paul makes a number of statements that are clear, but one which is a bit mystifying to us is his statement in verse 29 concerning baptism for the dead. This is the only reference in the Bible to this practice. Evidently something had occurred in Corinth, an epidemic or a natural disaster which claimed the lives of some Christians there, people who had not yet been baptized. The church was concerned to testify to the eternal life of the dead, and some Christians chose to be baptized in the names of those who had died unbaptized. Then they witnessed to unbelievers, saying that their departed brothers and sisters in the Lord would have testified to their faith if they had been there to do so. Thus they were doing what baptism always does, i.e. it makes public testimony of faith that had already existed, in this case for people who could not themselves be baptized because death had intervened. They spoke on behalf of departed ones who will be raised with Christ and offered bereaved unbelievers a chance to be reunited with them.

Certainly, Paul is not saying that some one can be baptized for one who is dead, an unbeliever, and that that baptism will be salvific. (Although some cults today teach and practice this.) Rather, what Paul is saying is that some in Corinth underwent baptism in the names of departed believers, with the intention of witnessing to their faith.

Any such action displaying Christian courage or concern presupposes the reality of the resurrection of believers. If the dead are not raised, and if Christ had not been raised, why, asks Paul, would he face danger every hour (verse 30); why would he die daily (verse 31); and why would he face dangers which confronted him at Ephesus (verse 32)? Remember that Paul's witness in Ephesus was an attack on practitioners of the occult, including those engaged in black magic, and silversmiths who made idols of the goddess Artemis. He refers to these people, metaphorically, as wild beasts.

Why would he put his life on the line in this way if the resurrection were not true? "If the dead are not raised," says Paul, "let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." If the message of the Scriptures is merely intended as an appeal to the sweeter side of human experience, if it is just a nice, quaint way to elevate our feelings about God and ourselves, then what would be the point of putting your life in jeopardy for it? What would be the point of suffering for it? We might as well eat, drink, and be merry, says the apostle. If they were trying to hold on to some ethical standards, and meanwhile allowing the truth which they had learned to be watered down and denied, then they would lose on both counts, according to Paul. "Bad company corrupts good morals"; "stop sinning"; "some have no knowledge of God," admonishes Paul. If you lose the truth, then any possibility of living the Christian life is lost, too.

RIDICULING THE RESURRECTION

In verse 35, Paul returns to his discussion of yet another theological deflection that had come about among the body at Corinth.

But some will say, "How are the dead raised? And with what kind of body do they come?" 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 something else. But God gives it a body just as He wished, and to each of the seeds a body of its own.

Again, it is clear that this question which the Corinthians had asked did not come innocently, but rather was a way of saying, "Isn't it ridiculous to be so committed to resurrection, to the raising of human life? After all, think about what happens to bodies. Some people die in fires, and their bodies are burned to a cinder. How are all those molecules collected again and and reconstituted into a body? What about those who have been buried for years? Even their bones have begun to disintegrate, not to mention what has happened to their flesh. How can their dust possibly be collected up and put back together again as a body? Are those who died as infants raised as infants? Isn't any talk of resurrection just foolish?" These are not legitimate questions, but rather examples of the arrogant ridicule some of the Corinthians had for what Paul had taught them. They are intimating that clearheaded, serious people refuse to get caught in myths such as resurrection from the dead.

SEEDS AND SELF-WORTH

"You fool!" replies Paul, "You have not thought through clearly." He takes seeds as his first analogy. After a wheat seed is planted, for instance, you do not find that a handful of similar-type seeds come out of the ground. What you get, rather, is a green stalk first, which later sprouts seed, then ripens and turns golden as it completes its life cycle. Thus, a wheat seed which has been planted and later grows, looks completely different than it did when it was planted. Yet the seed was predictably going to grow as wheat, not as squash or something else. What comes up is not the same in appearance as what was planted, yet there is continuity, there is predictability, because God is the one who determines that this be so.

Here Paul is testifying to the fact that although humans are planted in the ground when they die, they will be raised very different beings indeed. Bodies may be burned or suffer decay, but what was planted will not be the same as what will be raised. Yet there is continuity, however. The one who was buried will be the one who will be raised. Wheat seed will produce wheat. What you are right now, everything you are becoming inside, all of the changes which God is making in your character, will be there upon your resurrection. You will be raised, but not with the same body. In the resurrection, you will be gloriously different.

One thing that this should reassure us of is that the battle for self-worth in life will be won. How many of us struggle with believing that what we are becoming is worth something? Perhaps you have had an uphill struggle. You have found yourself under attack. You have been beaten, hurt and denied, and yet you realize that slowly but surely something is being made of you. You are not going to lose. The long battle for self-worth will be won. When you are raised, all of the things that you have become will be raised along with you, and yet it will be with an utterly different kind of body than the one that was planted.

I talked recently to a woman who has gone back to school after raising her family and putting her husband through college. When she was a teenager, her parents subtly convinced her that she was not smart enough to go to university. Dozens of other, similar messages created within her a sense of personal worthlessness. But now that she has gone back to school she has begun to see that all the put-downs which she has suffered throughout her life were not true. She is smart enough to complete her courses. She is not trying to gain self-worth from what she is doing, but rather is expressing self-worth by doing so. All the things which she has learned, the character, the courage, hope, etc., will be completed and raised with her, and she will be given a body and place to complement those things.

This is a great word of hope. We are not going to lose the battle. All the effort which we have expended in faith will accompany us into eternity. We are raised, and yet we will be changed. There is continuity and discontinuity both.

SUITED TO YOUR SURROUNDINGS

In verse 39, Paul uses a second metaphor to advance his argument:

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.

Think for a moment about the animal world, says Paul. Take earthworms, for instance. They are uniquely adapted to their environment. Humans could not survive in the same circumstances. We cannot ingest what worms eat; such a diet would not be suitable for us. In the same way, polar bears are uniquely adapted to their environment. They can swim and hunt in the frigid waters of the Antarctic. Humans, of course, would die if they tried that. Fish also are uniquely adapted to the water. They have gills, not lungs like humans have. From this, Paul concludes that when we are raised, we are going to be given bodies quite unlike the bodies which we now have which enable us to survive on earth, but rather we will have bodies uniquely fitted for heaven very different environment. Christians should expect this. God creates bodies to fit their environment.

Watching the Olympics on television this past week I concluded that my body and that of Matt Biondi's are, to say the least, quite different. He knifes through the water, setting all kinds of records, but when I swim a length or two of a pool, I have hardly enough energy left to climb out. I am not particularly suited to that environment, but the Olympics have shown us how wonderfully these swimmers perform.

Take clothing. Have you ever found yourself at some event wearing the wrong kind of clothes? Remember how awkward you felt? Pastors do not wear robes here at Peninsula Bible Church, but on occasion I have to wear a robe when I perform a wedding ceremony in another church. If I don't, I won't be taken seriously when I show up at the wedding. I will not be suitably dressed for the occasion. You cannot go to the symphony opening in jeans. We have all experienced at one time or another the embarrassment of being unsuitably dressed for a particular occasion.

This is what Paul is saying about the resurrection to come. Your old body will be planted, and you will receive a body suited for eternity. Earlier in this book, Paul said that we "see through a mirror dimly." As they are presently constituted, our bodies are not suited to seeing God in his glory. We could not survive such an experience, as Scripture declares. But the day is coming when we shall see God "face to face." And then we will have a body that is capable of enduring and surviving such an awesome sight.

RAISED IN GLORY

The third metaphor which Paul uses is that of the heavenly bodies, the sun, moon and stars. Verse 40:

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. 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. So also it is written, "The first man, Adam, became a living soul." The last Adam became a life-giving spirit. However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural; then the spiritual. 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. And just as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly.

Seeds which have sprouted and grown are reminders that there will be a resurrection. Lessons can be learned from the animal world which can be applied to the resurrection. And now, says Paul, the heavenlies teach us the same lesson. The sun, moon and stars all differ in their glory, and so does the earth when it is compared with these bodies. The earth has none of the brightness of the heavens, nor does it have the transcendence, wonder, infinity or beauty of the stars.

We can learn something about glory in the resurrection, too, and that is, what is of this earth is earthy and buried, but what is raised is more glorious. It is not just different. That is the point of Paul's first metaphor-that resurrection bodies will be different from what is sown. But here he makes the point that what is raised is greater and more glorious, more beautiful, more capable of intimacy with God, more fitted for heaven and for the spirit that has been born in us; the character of Christ. "sown perishable, is raised imperishable; what is sown in dishonor is raised in glory." Not merely different, but better.

God created Adam from the dust of the earth and breathed the spirit into him. This world was to be man's kindergarten, the first place where he would learn of God. Even if man had not sinned, it was God's intent to take him to heaven after apprenticeship. Now, on this side of Adam's fall, sin has intervened and we require a Savior to get us there. But the second life, the body for which we are headed by union with the last Adam, is one that begins with the spirit having been made right, perfected, and then joined to a body that will be able to respond to it. In this life, our body was created first and then the spirit given it; in the life to come it is the other way around. How difficult to imagine a body that will never fail us; bodies that will be fit to stand in the light of God; fitted for spirits that have been made like Christ. Our resurrection body thus will be much more glorious than anything we can imagine.

THE FAILURE OF FLESH AND BLOOD

Verse 50 draws a conclusion which we need to focus on.

Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

Paul's detractors in Corinth had asked a number of cynical and sarcastic questions concerning resurrection bodies, trying to show that any notion of resurrection was just foolishness. But the apostle refutes their arguments by demonstrating that what is sown is not the same as what is raised. Bodies are created to suit their environment and so shall resurrection bodies. We are destined for glory in the life to come. This is why Paul concludes by saying that the perishable does not inherit the imperishable. The body which we have right now will not make it in eternity.

Some people are committed to hanging on to this life. They hope to do so, and avoid the aging process, by their involvement in the exercise and physical fitness craze. Many of the baby boom generation regard physical beauty and strength as the most important things in life. Others commit to financial security, to making life as pleasant and as pampered as possible. But Paul is saying that Christians are destined to have new bodies and they cannot take a single thing with them. Any hope we may have of retaining anything physical or material is just foolishness.

The words of Jesus comes ringing back to us again: "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, where thieves break in and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." Christians should care for the kind of character they will take with them into eternity, the truth of God that will not change, the souls of those around us, the things that God values. Flesh and blood can not inherit the kingdom of God. Any holding on to the things of this world, the

advantages we may have gained, is futile because they will come to an end one day and we will be planted in the ground. What we take with us then will be the inner man, his character, values, ministry and courage, to be clothed by a new body.

Jesus refused to turn stones into bread in order to feed himself when he was hungry. He likewise refused to leap off the temple, testing God to make him secure in this life and before others. Finally, he refused the devil's offer of this world and its kingdoms. He knew that he could have all of those, but that he would have nothing if that was all he had. "Lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven," knowing that we are destined to go there.

I'd rather have Jesus than silver or gold,
I'd rather be His than have riches untold.
I'd rather have Jesus than houses or land,
I'd rather be led by His nail-pierced hand.

I'd rather have Jesus than man's applause,
I'd rather be faithful to His dear cause.
I'd rather have Jesus than world-wide fame,
I'd rather be true to His holy name,
Than to be the ruler of a vast domain,

And be held in sin's dread sway.
I'd rather have Jesus than anything
This world can afford today.

Catalog No. 4080
1 Cor.15:29-49
22nd Message
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September 25, 1988

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