

1 Corinthians 15:35-49
Seeds of the Resurrection

[35] But someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?”

[36] You foolish person! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.

[37] And what you sow is not the body that is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain.

[38] But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body.

[39] For not all flesh is the same, but there is one kind for humans, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish.

[40] There are heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is of one kind, and the glory of the earthly is of another.

[41] 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.

[42] So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable.

[43] It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power.

[44] It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.

[45] Thus it is written, “The first man Adam became a living being”; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit.

[46] But it is not the spiritual that is first but the natural, and then the spiritual.

[47] The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven.

[48] As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven.

[49] Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven. (ESV)

Pop quiz time: what holiday took place this week on Tuesday?

Hint: you might have seen or eaten some Paczkis on Tuesday.

That’s right, it was Mardi Gras, or “Fat Tuesday” in English. It’s called Fat Tuesday because traditionally, you would eat all the meat and rich food in your house in preparation for the next day, Wednesday.

So, question #2: What holiday took place this week on Wednesday?

It was Ash Wednesday, the day after Mardi Gras that marks 40 days before Easter Sunday.

For many believers today and throughout much of Church history, this 40-day period before Easter Sunday known as Lent is marked by fasting, praying, and a sort of solemn, symbolic participation with Christ’s passion and suffering before the celebration of new life on Easter morning. Ash Wednesday, then, begins this season by observing grief and death, in anticipation of the joyous life to come. In some traditions, ashes are spread on the foreheads of believers as they recite these words from the book of Common Prayer:

“Ashes to ashes, dust to dust”

Whether or not you observe Lent or Ash Wednesday, these words still serve as a sober reminder that we are all dust. Or as the writer of Ecclesiastes put it, our lives are like a vanishing mist. Death is an inevitable part of life.

As Benjamin Franklin put it, "In this world, nothing can be certain, except death and taxes." Although, as one comedian put it, “The difference between death and taxes is death doesn’t get worse every time Congress meets.”

So, what then, do we make of death?
Is death the end of our story?

I hope that all of us would answer that question with an emphatic “NO!”

But what then, is the end of our story?
Is the end of our story “going to heaven when we die”?
Or is it something bigger than that?

I would argue that Paul, in this passage, and throughout the entire narrative of the Bible, God is showing us that His plan, His story for us doesn’t just end when we die. It marks the beginning of something far greater than we can imagine. The greatest anticipation for the believer then is not *just* going to heaven when you die, but looking ahead to when God will bring about New Creation - the new heavens and new earth, the redemption of our resurrected bodies.

So the **main idea** for this morning is this:

The seeds of resurrection hope planted throughout the Scriptures point us to a future, forever life in the New Creation.

In today’s passage, we find ourselves right in the middle of Paul’s teaching to the Corinthian church regarding the resurrection of Jesus, and the hope of future resurrection. By way of recap, chapter 15 begins with Paul’s reiteration of the good news that was proclaimed to the church in Corinth. This was the good news that was heard and received by many there, who believed the gospel proclamation of Paul and others who traveled to Corinth. That gospel message was summed up by Paul starting in verse 3:

“that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, [4] that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,”

And then he gives the firsthand testimony of this good news that Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah, was literally - not symbolically or figuratively - raised from the dead:

[5] and that he appeared to Cephas [that is, Peter], then to the twelve [disciples]. [6] Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.”

The good news hinges on the definitive truth and testimony of others that Jesus was raised from the dead. The good news hinges on the fact that the Messiah is not in a tomb turning to ashes, but is fully, completely alive.

And yet...as we'll see, many in the Corinthian church, while on one hand affirming the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, were denying any hope of the future, bodily resurrection.

Even Paul seemed a little baffled earlier in the chapter at what seemed like the Corinthians' lapse of logic. In verse 12 of this chapter, he writes, "Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?"

Why was this? How could their logic have been so skewed?

1) **Seeds of doubt can cause us to lose hope in the resurrection**

These seeds of doubt might take root from bad theology, giving in to popular cultural ideas, and even circumstances - like grief, sudden death of a loved one, turmoil, war, injustice, and so much more - might cause doubt and unbiblical beliefs to take root.

Just as today there are a variety of views on the afterlife (or whether or not there even is one) the ancient, Greco-Roman world, and even the Jewish world, was filled with a variety of beliefs.

How did the surrounding culture answer the question: What happens to you when you die?

In Paul's day, the **Epicureans** and Stoics of Greece would have believed there was no afterlife. Their primary aim was to relieve themselves of fear and suffering in this life, thereby not having any fear of death and finding ultimate contentment in the intricacies and delicacies of this fleeting life.

Two verses earlier, in verses 32-33, Paul does some skillful rhetoric to dismantle this worldview by weaving together a passage from Isaiah 22, the Epicurean philosophy of "eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we may die," and a quote from the Epicurean playwright, Menander ("bad company corrupts good morals"). Basically, Paul is saying, "the bad company you're keeping with these Epicurean worldviews are corrupting what should be your Biblical worldview."

In Jewish circles, the Sadducees held a prominent role and they rejected the resurrection of the dead. We can see the Sadducees testing Jesus on questions regarding the afterlife in the Gospels. They read the same Old Testament, but came out with a twisted theology - they didn't have eyes to see the hope of the resurrection throughout the Scriptures..

In today's day, there's a similar but darker version of this worldview called "**Nihilism**." That is, not only do Nihilists believe there is no such thing as the afterlife, but there is no meaning and purpose to our materialistic existence, whatsoever. Life as we know it, they would say, is a sad

accident. Everything is dust, dark, and dim in this existence. If this seed of doubt is in your mind today, I pray that the hope of the resurrection would fill your heart and mind.

One more Greek philosophy regarding the afterlife, and then I promise, we're done with the history lesson! But this one is important for us today, because unfortunately, this idea would resonate with many (if not most) mainline Christians, and even evangelicals today. And this thinking had also been at play in the Corinthian church. At best, this view of the body and resurrection tells an incomplete story, but at worst, this view of the body and of resurrection distorts the power of God and His plans for us in the future.

That is, the Greek philosopher Plato believed that the soul was immortal, previously existing in another realm, and for some reason now trapped inside the body. The body, as he put it, was a dirty prison, or tomb, for the soul. The ultimate goal of existence was to leave the body, return the eternal soul to its "Pure Form".

Theologian N.T. Wright in his book "Surprised By Hope" writes:

"Most Western Christians...in fact suppose that Christianity was committed to at least a soft version of Plato's position. A good many Christian hymns and poems wander off unthinkingly in [this direction]. The 'just passing through' spirituality, though it has some affinities with classical Christianity, encourages precisely a [Platonic or even] Gnostic attitude: the created world is at best irrelevant, at worst a dark, evil, gloomy place, and we immortal souls, who existed originally in a different sphere, are looking forward to returning to it as soon as we're allowed to. A massive assumption has been made in Western Christianity that the purpose of being a Christian is simply, or at least mainly, to 'go to heaven when you die.'"

As we'll see, Jesus and all of Scripture describe our bodies, the hope of resurrection, and our stories as something much, much bigger than "leaving your body and going to heaven when you die." Now let me be clear, if you have put your faith in Jesus Christ, you WILL go to heaven when you breathe your last breath. Just as Jesus told the thief on the cross next to him, "today you will be with me in paradise." That is, the believer's soul does not experience Death, but instant unity with Jesus, the Father, and the saints in the heavenly realm.

But...that's not the end of the story! While much of our imagination is on "life after death", what the Scriptures point to as the culminating moment in God's plan, or as N.T. Wright puts it, "life after life after death." Or as Paul called it a few chapters earlier in 1 Corinthians: the moment when "the perfect comes" and our faith and hope is fulfilled, and what's left is a life of eternal love.

We'll look at it further in just a bit, but it's that moment described in the last two chapters of Revelation, where heaven - described as the holy city - descends upon the earth, and God dwells with his resurrected people forever and ever.

The resurrection is not just about a mystical, ethereal existence floating on clouds, etc.

The unified Biblical story shows us that the Resurrection event will be a real, supernatural and physical existence where both heaven and earth are unified as one - as God has always intended it.

2) The Seeds of the Resurrection found throughout Scripture

In order to talk about the end, we have to go all the way back to the beginning - to Genesis. Remember, under Plato's influence, the soul was eternal in existence from the past and trapped in the body. But according to Paul in verse 47 of this chapter, and the Creation account in Genesis, "The first man was from the earth, a man of dust."

In Genesis 2, we see Creator God taking the dust of the ground and fashioning man from it. In Hebrew, God creates "*adam*" (the first man, or sometimes more generally, humanity) from the "*adamah*" (the dirt). This play on words in the creation account might be something like, "God took the earth to create Earthling, and we are all earthlings." Or my wife has an old college friend named Dusty, so that made me think, "God took the dust to create Dusty."

So God fashions this dusty human, and breathes into him the breath of life, or "*ruach Elohim*" – God breathes into the human His Spirit. He creates man and woman to be the keepers of the Garden. The language used of Adam and Eve in the Hebrew Scriptures is similar to the language used of priests and kings later on in the Bible. Humanity was created to both worship God and rule or steward His creation - the beasts of the air, and land, and sea - each with their own kind of flesh.

That's why, reflecting on the Creation, Paul writes in our passage, referring to days 4, 5, and 6 of creation in backwards order, from the things created on the earth to the things created in the sky, or celestial realm:

[38] But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body.

[39] For not all flesh is the same, but there is one kind for humans, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish.

[40] There are heavenly* bodies (**heavenly in this context refers to the "sky" and not to "the place you go when you die"*)

and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is of one kind, and the glory of the earthly is of another.

[41] 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.

What Paul is saying here is that in the same way God chose different flesh for different created things, the resurrected body will be up to God's creative power in the New Creation. More on that later...

Continuing on in the Creation account, we see that this Garden of Eden, or Garden of Paradise, was where God met with and lived with Adam and Eve. It was a place where Heaven and Earth met. And God calls His creation of man very good.

But the story goes on. Adam and Eve sinned against God, were exiled from the Garden, and Death was the consequence. Death, then, is the number one sign that we are no longer in Eden. But even Death cannot prevent God's plan to restore the life of Eden to His people. In fact, if Death is the ultimate exile, then Resurrection will be the ultimate homecoming.

The prophets, priests, and psalmists then looked forward to that day when God would reverse the curse of sin and death.

In the book of Daniel, chapter 12, he writes in a vision,
"And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt."

Isaiah also writes of this future resurrection hope in chapter 26:
"Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a dew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead."

The psalmist in Psalm 49 writes,
"But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol (*or, the "land of the dead"*), for He will receive me."

And in Psalm 71,
"Your righteousness, O God, reaches the high heavens. You who have done great things, O God, who is like you? [20] You...will revive me again; from the depths of the earth you will bring me up again."

There are many other passages to mention here, most notably, the vision Ezekiel has in Ezekiel chapter 37 of a valley of dry bones coming back to life, making an everlasting covenant of peace with Creator God, and living with Him forever.

But the point is this: throughout the Old Testament, we see these seeds of hope sprinkled throughout prophecies, visions, and songs. It was not just a hope of a soul departing off to a "better place," but of bones, ashes, and dust being raised back up one day to either live with God for eternity in the New Creation, or be eternally separated from Him.

Jesus' words in John 5 then are consistent with the Old Testament promises:
"Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment"

I would imagine, if you've never thought about this before, it might be jarring. You might even be asking the same questions the Corinthians were asking:
[35] But someone will ask, "How are the dead raised? (Literally in the Greek, how will the corpses be awakened?) With what kind of body do they come?"

And Paul would answer:

[36] You foolish person! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.

[37] And what you sow is not the body that is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain.

[38] But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body.

Paul here is using a farming analogy that is woven through this chapter. Earlier, we learned that Christ's resurrection from the dead was the "first fruits." That is in agriculture, the best, sweetest fruit that is a signpost the harvest is coming. Once again, at that time we learned that didn't mean Paul was saying Jesus was the first one brought back to life. There are a few examples in both the Old and New Testaments of God bringing back people to life. But that's just what it was - God bringing people back up to life to show His power over death.

Jesus' resurrection was different. He didn't come back to life. He was resurrected into the New Creation body. A body that is physical - Jesus still ate with the disciples. But a body that is also spiritual - Jesus could suddenly appear to the disciples and ascend into Heaven. Jesus' resurrection body is proof that the best is yet to come.

3) From the seeds of this life, New Creation will grow.

Paul equates our current bodies as a bare kernel. Though God created our bodies as a part of His good creation, our bodies are riddled with the effects of sin and sickness. Sometimes it's our own sin that causes decay to our bodies, and sometimes it's the sin of others that scars and damages and leads to death. Our bodies now, as with all creation, groan for the redemption and renewal of our bodies. And that day is coming!

Paul writes,

[42] So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown (*in other words, our bodies that go into the ground like a seed*) is perishable; what is raised is imperishable.

[43] It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power.

[44] It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.

Referring to the natural and spiritual body, commentator C.K. Barrett writes, "*Natural* translates an adjective based on the Greek noun *soul*, or *life* (ψυχή); it describes the body, animated by soul, with which a man is clothed and equipped during his life in this age
Spiritual...refers to the Spirit of God, and the spiritual body is the new body, animated by the Spirit of God, with which the same man will be clothed and equipped in the age to come, which he reaches by way of resurrection.

In other words, it is precisely because of Adam that we have a dusty body rife with sin that is buried in the ground. But it is precisely because of Jesus - the second Adam - that we WILL have a Spirit filled body that is united with God and the saints for all eternity.

That is why Paul writes:

[45] Thus it is written, “The first man Adam became a living being”; the last Adam (that is Jesus Christ) became a life-giving spirit.

[46] But it is not the spiritual that is first but the natural, and then the spiritual. (*Paul again here, is most likely poking at Plato’s worldview*).

[47] The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man (Jesus) is from heaven.

[48] As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven.

[49] Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.

Right now, our physical bodies still bear the image of Adam. But our spiritual body shares in the likeness of Christ. That’s why Paul can say in the next letter to the church in Corinth, “if anyone is in Christ, he is a New Creation. The old has gone, the new has come!” It’s this already-not-yet theme woven throughout the Scriptures. If you put your faith in Christ, there is a spiritual resurrection that happens in the present (now/already), but a physical, corporeal resurrection yet to come (not yet). In 2nd Peter, chapter 3, Peter writes, “But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.”

One day, at the future Resurrection, our bodies will share the likeness of Christ’s resurrected body. I can’t comprehend what that will look like, but thinking and pondering that in the present gives us hope, wonder, and excitement for the future of living in the New Creation.

In some ways, it’s like asking an acorn what it will be like when it is made into what it was always meant to be - a towering oak tree. Or like asking a caterpillar what it will be like to fly.

The point remains though, our lives and our bodies are not prisons of the soul. They are our bodies to steward, to honor, to use to carry out the Kingdom purposes of God.

While we wait for the hope of the resurrection, we use our “bare kernel” of a body, as Paul put it, to use for the Kingdom. We proclaim this everlasting life by our words and deeds. Our labor for the Kingdom in these “dusty” bodies is not in vain. Our labor that we sow here on this earth, through the power of God’s Spirit, will reap a life we can’t even imagine in the New Creation with Christ.

N.T. Wright again, in closing:

“The point of the resurrection...is that the present bodily life is not valueless just because it will die...What you do with your body in the present matters because God has a great future in store for it...What you do in the present—by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbor as yourself—will last into God’s future. These activities are not simply ways of making the present life a little less beastly, a little more bearable, until the day when we leave it behind altogether (as the hymn so mistakenly puts it...). They are part of what we may call building for God’s kingdom.”

“People who believe in the resurrection, in God making a whole new world in which everything will be set right at last, are unstoppably motivated to work for that new world in the present.”

“God’s plan is not to abandon this world, the world which he said was ‘very good.’ Rather, he intends to remake it. And when he does he will raise all his people to new bodily life to live in it. That is the promise of the Christian Gospel.”