

1 Corinthians 15:35-38

PREFACE

We are now ready for the third and final section of Chapter Fifteen. The first section was vv1-11: *The Resurrection of Christ*, in which the apostle establishes the *fact* of Christ's resurrection. The second section was vv12-34: *The Certainty of (our) Resurrection* because of the certainty of Christ's—which had to come first, for He was “the first fruits of those who are asleep” (v20). And now we begin the third section, vv35-58: *The Resurrection Body*, in which Paul either anticipates the questions in the minds of the Corinthians, or has already heard them—to wit, *How will this resurrection actually take place?*

Read 1 Corinthians 15:35-38.

v35

But someone will say, “How are the dead raised? And with what kind of body do they come?”

Paul's strong, even coarse response at the beginning of the next verse would lead us to believe that if this was indeed a set of questions sent to the apostle, it was not submitted in good faith. We have seen it before in this letter, that the Corinth assembly (or at least certain individuals in it) is actually prone to be *argumentative*, rather than humbly, honestly seeking answers, from the one who founded their church. It is also possible that he is simply supplying the questions himself, as a device to further his argument. There really is only one “question” being asked; the second specifies what the first leaves vague, and the second illumines the specifics behind the Corinthians' misgivings about resurrection.

To a certain extent we can sympathize with the Corinthians—those who “say that there is no resurrection of the dead” (v12). Their position is understandable if they thought of “resurrection” as meaning a dead and decayed body being raised “as is”—i.e., nothing more than a reanimated corpse. No one—especially one under the influence of the Greek culture—would wish for that to be the case; if even *living* flesh was abhorrent to them, how much more so flesh that had been corrupted by the grave!

Back in Chapter Six of this letter we were discussing the licentious behavior of some in the church.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:13-16.

The Corinthians had picked up the Grecian idea that the flesh, the physical body is nothing, that as “spiritual” beings we can look on our bodies as not even part of our essential being. The Corinthians were saying, “Hey, I’m now a ‘spiritual’ being. The body is nothing—it’s just sex. For the physical body, everything is lawful for me.” But in the economy of God for man, sex is more than that; it is reserved for the marital state, and there it becomes something deep and profound. Sex outside marriage perverts God’s eloquent and sublime plan for man and woman.

It only follows that to someone subscribing to that philosophy the very idea of reanimating the long-dead body with resurrection (i.e., without some sort of change) would be a *repulsive* thought.

v36A

You fool!

The NASB and the original KJV are the most literal with “You (Thou) fool.” Gordon Fee points out that here is a “translator’s dilemma, since [You fool] is what Paul says, but the English ‘equivalent’ is almost certainly more harsh than Paul would have intended.” Hence we have our common translations attempting to smooth it out a bit. The Greek *aphron* refers to someone who is senseless, foolish, or, in this context, someone lacking “wisdom,” which would have been received by the Corinthians as a most disagreeable cut. The ESV is pretty good with, “You foolish person!”

The apostle Paul does not just think in eschatological terms—invariably placing his teaching in the context of the Last Things (*Eschaton*)—but he is also probably more knowledgeable of the Hebrew Scriptures than most. As he delivers the new and good news of Christ, his mind remains a catalog of what God was speaking *before* the incarnation of Christ Jesus. So when he reprimands the either representative or actual questioner of v35 with “You fool!” he is not just letting off steam, but hearkening back to the strength of that term in the OT.

Read Psalm 14:1-4.

Repeatedly in the OT the “fool” (same Greek word *aphron* in the Septuagint) is used to describe the one who fails to understand or even acknowledge God. Based on what he writes in the rest of this chapter, Paul could very well be accusing the Corinthians of either not knowing or forgetting the authoritative and creative power of Almighty God. And let us not be too quick to throw stones at that ancient congregation, for with all the ready distractions of our own time we can easily do the same.

In a 2019 issue of *Reflections* entitled “O God, Have We Made You Too Small?” I wrote this:

When we think too much of ourselves, it is easy to think God too small. When we become consumed with our small and transient trials, the result is that we fill our world with self. The more room taken up by self, the less room remains for God.

Then I followed it with this quote from A. W. Tozer:

While we are looking at God, we do not see ourselves—blessed riddance.

Caught up in their own temporal lives, the Corinthians could well have stopped thinking very much about God, and forgetting that the One

- who created the universe and everything in it;
- who, as we will see, invented the idea of a seed, moldering in the wet soil, that would spring to new life in a form different from itself;
- who raised the flesh-bound Son of God from the dead to a body that could not be held by time or space or physical barriers—yet could also eat food—that this One could and would also do the same for every believer.

vv36B-37

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.

Not being a farmer, I nonetheless take note each summer and fall of the growth and wonder of the planted crops on either side of the road. As expensive as it can be to plant and harvest acres of corn, for example, it is a pretty good return: plant one kernel of corn in exchange for two *ears* of kernels. But even before that, I marvel at the creative genius of a God who invented the process by which a solitary seed can be buried underground, to eventually become a tall, healthy plant that looks nothing like the seed from which it emerged—a plant that comes equipped to start the cycle all over again by bearing fruit that can also be buried to produce *another* plant!

Like the Greeks, an agronomist might take issue with Paul’s use of the word “dies” (*apothane*) to describe what happens to the seed; the Greeks would say that the seed “springs to life.” [But turn to John’s gospel.](#)

Read John 12:24-25.

Drop a kernel of corn into a baggy and place it in a drawer. Twenty years later that corn will not have changed. Place it in soil and water it, and a brand new plant will result.

As D. A. Carson points out in his thoughts on the John passage,

To love one's life is a fundamental denial of God's sovereignty...and therefore an idolatrous focus on self, which is the heart of all sin. Such a person loses his life, i.e., causes his own perdition. By contrast, the one who hates his life...will keep it for eternal life. This person denies himself...i.e., he chooses not to pander to self-interest but at the deepest level of his being declines to make himself the focus of his interest and perception, thereby "dying."

Now, while the illustration is the same, it is true that Jesus was making a different point from Paul in this letter. Jesus' point was centered around death being necessary for fruit, while Paul's "concern is with death as the precondition of the life to come, not in the sense that *all must die* [v51] but in the sense that the seed itself demonstrates that *out of death* a new expression of life springs forth" (Fee).

Nevertheless, I contend that the two points can be harmonized. Jesus spoke of denying self to serve Him. In the next verse He says, "If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also..." (John 12:26). "Life eternal" means life with Christ. Jesus says that we get there by serving Him. Paul says that "life eternal" is not just a spiritual life but a *physical* one that will require a new body—one springing forth from the death of the old.

I would also contend that there is no real tension between what Paul says here about "unless it dies" and what he says in v51 about some being changed who do not "sleep." For that change to an imperishable, spiritual body (vv42-44) does indeed require the "death" of the former body; it ceases to exist. In Paul's analogy, the "seed," that which is sown, is not "the body which is to be," but one utterly different. And the kernel of corn planted in the ground, once from it the new plant has emerged, dies; once its work is done, it withers and decays into nothingness.

v38

But God gives it a body just as He wished, and to each of the seeds a body of its own. Paul is not yet ready to move from the analogy of the seed to the human application, but he hints at it in his three uses of the word "body" (*soma*) in vv37-38. Stand back and look at an entire field of corn; the plants all look the same. But they are not—and that is how God designed it. Whether wheat, or corn, or the human body it is all worked out according to the will of God. This is why the apostle called the questioner a "fool" in v36: the question itself left the creative genius of God out of the equation. God will do as He pleases because He *is* God, and it pleases Him to raise to new life and a new body that which has died.

Read Philippians 3:20-21.