

1 Corinthians 15:35-58: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 17 July 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] 1 Corinthians chapter 15 verses 35 to 58 But someone will ask, How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come? You foolish person! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.

And what you sow is not the body that 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.

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

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 is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable. What is raised is imperishable.

It is sown in dishonour. 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.

[1 : 10] Thus it is written, The first man Adam became a living being. The last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first, but the natural, 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 also are those who are of the dust. And as is the man of heaven, so also 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. I tell you this, brothers. Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

Behold, I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in a twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.

For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.

[2 : 24] O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain. It seems to be that at the heart of the Corinthians' objections, there was incredulity about the possibility of a resurrection body.

And here, in the second half of 1 Corinthians chapter 15, Paul turns to address this point. Perhaps for the Corinthians, such a belief in the resurrection of the body would be seen as a primitive superstition for people who hadn't yet arrived at the recognition of the lower character of corporeality.

Paul addresses the seemingly underlying question of the form in which the dead would be raised, disposing with some bad misunderstandings at the outset. The resurrection is not a mere resuscitation of dead corpses in their existing form.

Such resuscitation can be seen in gospel narratives such as that of Jairus' daughter or the raising of Lazarus. Jesus' resurrection, however, is something quite different. It entails a radical transformation.

[3 : 39] The body that was sown was the body that was raised, but it was that body having undergone a remarkable transformation. Paul gives the analogy of a seed that is sown.

The seed is quite different from the plant that grows from it. Jesus himself seems to speak of his own death and resurrection in terms of such an analogy in John chapter 12 verse 24.

The body that emerges from the sown seed is ultimately a gift of God.

Paul then proceeds to list a number of different forms of physicality in the current heavens and earth, describing variegated creatures and earthly and heavenly bodies in this existing creation.

These forms of physicality markedly differ in their standing and glory. Paul is trying to expand the imaginative frameworks that the Corinthians are operating within here.

[4 : 37] Thinking in terms of the variety of forms given by God in the existing creation might make it more possible for the Corinthians to consider the possibility of a yet more glorious form in the new creation.

In contrasting the great and the varying glories of the heavenly bodies with the lesser glories of earthly bodies, Paul may be giving us an analogy that anticipates the distinction he will draw between the earthly body and the heavenly body later in his argument.

He may also have in mind Daniel chapter 12 verses 2 to 3, which employs this very analogy. 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.

And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above, and those who turn many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever. The point isn't that the righteous literally become stars.

Rather the point is that they will have an enduring glory like that of the stars. Returning to the seed analogy, which serves to underline the importance of transformation, Paul contrasts the character of the body before and after the resurrection.

[5 : 46] It's perishable beforehand, it's imperishable afterwards. It's sown in dishonour beforehand, it's raised in glory. It's natural beforehand, it's spiritual afterwards. These distinctions describe different aspects of the change that will occur.

There will be a changing relationship to the powers of death and decay. There will be a changing status as the raised body will be glorious. There will be changing capacities as bodies of weakness will be raised as bodies of power.

There will be a changing manner of existence as a natural or soulish body of this creation will be raised as a body animated by the spirit of God. In speaking of a spiritual body in contrast to a natural or soulish body, Paul isn't speaking of an immaterial or non-corporeal existence.

Rather he is referring to a new, higher, more glorious and more powerful mode of corporeality. The mechanics of the change aren't Paul's concern. The fact of it and the ultimate cause of it is what matters.

These are bodies given by God. And if God has created a body suitable for the current natural order, animated by our souls, it is entirely reasonable to believe that there is a body suited to the coming renewed world of the spirit, animated by the spirit himself.

[7 : 04] Paul proceeds to contrast the first Adam and the last Adam. The first Adam, Paul writes, became a living soul, quoting Genesis chapter 2, a man doomed with his descendants to death and decay.

The last Adam became a life-giving spirit. The first Adam was characterised by an impotence that was subject to death. The last Adam, by sharp contrast, has the power to communicate life, a life of a much higher order.

He is a life-giving spirit, as it is the spirit of Christ that communicates the resurrection life to his people. Adam and Christ are juxtaposed in order to highlight how sharp the contrast between them is.

Christ's character is the last Adam, and the life-giving spirit makes clear again that Christ himself is the one who communicates resurrection life and the resurrection body to us.

He is the head and the source of a new humanity. Philippians chapter 3 verses 20 to 21 read, But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

[8 : 18] There is an order to this. The natural, soulish body of Adam comes first, and then the glorious, spiritual body of Christ. Paul's discussion here suggests, I believe, that the advent of Christ was always intended from the beginning.

Humanity begun in Adam was always intended to be consummated in Christ. We were created in the image of God, so that one day we might be raised to our full stature as humanity, in union with the one who is the image of God.

As things happened within God's will, Christ's coming was into the conditions of a fallen humanity, and a world subject to the reign of death. But the intent of the resurrection exceeds mere deliverance from sin.

Rather, the resurrection is about raising humanity up to the glory for which we were always intended. Why does Paul say first Adam and last Adam, but first man and second man?

Possibly because there were many Adam-like figures, Noah, Abraham and David among them, but only two human persons who stand as the head and prototype of an entire humanity.

[9 : 36] The people who belong to Adam and Christ bear their respective images. In Genesis chapter 5 verse 3, we're told that Adam had a son in his own likeness after his image.

Seth. In Romans chapter 8 verse 29, Paul informs the hearers of the letter that Christians were predestined to be conformed to the image of the Son. The reference to bearing the image of Christ should not be restricted to the future.

Paul believes that this transformation is already underway for the people of God, and that it should be pursued. 2 Corinthians chapter 3 verse 18 And we all with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

Like the old image, this new image is not merely or even primarily an individual reality. Paul writes in Colossians chapter 3 verses 9 to 11, Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices, and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.

Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free, but Christ is all, and in all. As those who are a new humanity in Christ, we are called to be transformed into his likeness.

[10 : 57] Paul's teaching here has a strong underlying moral force, as we see in Ephesians chapter 4 verses 20 to 24. But this is not the way you learned Christ. Paul now speaks of the transformation that will occur.

Whether or not we die or fall asleep, as Paul puts it, we will all undergo an instantaneous yet radical change.

Our raised bodies will be continuous with our current bodies, but they will also be gloriously and permanently changed. This will occur at the last blowing of the trumpet. The trumpet blast is associated with such things as the year of Jubilee, with the theophanic appearance of God at Sinai, and with the day of the Lord in the prophets.

Earlier in this chapter, Paul spoke of Christ's ascension, and the expectation that all enemies would be put under his feet, the last of those enemies being death itself. Now, at the end of the chapter, and the end of the teaching of the main body of the epistle, he returns to this point.

The raising of our bodies from the grave will mark the final and complete victory of Christ over death. He quotes Isaiah chapter 25, of which verses 6 to 8 read as follows.

[12 : 39] On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well-refined.

And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.

Isaiah's vision of the Lord's victory over death, and an eschatological feast for all peoples, will find its fulfillment in the final resurrection. This is of course something taken up in the book of Revelation, in chapter 21, verses 1 to 4.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.

[13 : 53] He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more. Neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.

The second part of Paul's statement quotes Hosea chapter 13, verse 14, which in the ESV reads, I shall ransom them from the power of Sheol. I shall redeem them from death.

O death, where are your plagues? O Sheol, where is your sting? The ESV here is closer to the Septuagint reading. However, the verse in question is part of a judgment oracle, which makes it more likely that we are to read the verse like the NRSV does.

Shall I ransom them from the power of Sheol? Shall I redeem them from death? O death, where are your plagues? O Sheol, where is your destruction? Compassion is hidden from my eyes.

If this is the case, Paul may be purposefully alluding to the passage to reverse its force. In the very words once used to summon the power of death to destroy and judge, its ultimate defeat is now proclaimed.

[14:58] In the very expressions by which the maw of death was once opened up to swallow a disobedient people, its defanging and head-crushing is announced. The victory over death was dealt with by dealing with its sting, sin, the power of which was the law.

This is something that Paul explores in Romans and Galatians especially. Christ, by dying for our sins, robbed death of its sting and gives us the victory over it.

As Hebrews chapter 2 verse 9 and 14 to 15 put it, But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honour because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.

The chapter and the body of the whole letter ends with the great but perhaps surprising statement, Therefore my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.

[16:16] The fact of the resurrection is the ground and the encouragement for all faithful living in the world. Because of the resurrection, our labour is not in vain. Because of the resurrection, what we do in and with our bodies matters.

Because of the resurrection, we can abound in our sowing of seeds, confident that we await a great final harvest. Because of the resurrection, we know that everything that is truly done in Christ will endure.

[illegible][illegible]