

Sermon 59: 1 Corinthians 15:35-49: The Resurrection Body

OUTLINE

Arguments illustrating the reality of our resurrection bodies
Conclusions highlighting the nature of our resurrection bodies

INTRODUCTION

The Hebrew mindset was well prepared for the idea of being resurrected bodily from the dead. Think back to the beginning of the bible to that great man Enoch, who walked with God and God took him, Gen. 5:25. Martin Luther reflecting on this writes that God took 'Enoch in person, in order to show that there has been prepared and set aside for men another and also a better life than this present life which is replete with so many misfortunes and evils. Granted that Enoch, too, is a sinner, nevertheless he departs this life in such a way that God grants him another life, an eternal life.'¹ He goes into the emotions of Methuselah his son and Jared his father and how they would have been confounded and wept but ultimately comforted as they knew he was with God bodily in His presence. And how God puts right there at the beginning of the Bible this reality that sinners will dwell bodily with God, this hope that we too can be with Him. Abraham clung to this hope of resurrection when he was willing to sacrifice Isaac, Heb. 11:19. Job, likely a contemporary of Abraham also had the same hope of bodily resurrection, Job. 19:25-27a, 'For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.' The Israelite would sing from their songbook and regularly sing the words of David's hope of bodily resurrection, which also turned out to be a Messianic prophecy of Jesus' own resurrection, Ps. 16:10, 'For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.' When it came to the difficult questions like how can resurrection work when our bodies have rotted or if our bones have been confused with others in mass graves, Ezekiel 37 gives a vision of the valley of dry bones, and how they are subject to the voice of the Lord to reassemble at His will and come to life. So that by the time of the NT the majority view was one of belief in a bodily resurrection, unlike the Sadducees who denied bodily resurrection. This would be a comfortable idea and part of the hope of any Jewish believer, but not so with the Greek.

Greek philosophy had all sorts of ideas about the afterlife, but a hope of bodily resurrection was seen as both undesirable, and because undesirable impossible. Paul realizes he is coming up against a Greek influenced worldview in v35, 'But someone will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" This was a genuine question, because of the views they held, they found certain things inconceivable. In their minds the body was a prison cell of the soul, and something gladly shed in death, to be resurrected bodily was an abominable idea. Paul anticipates the sort of questions that would be raised, how is it possible, what would this so called body look like? Would this mean that a worm ridden version of ourselves would arise? Would we have to go on living forever in a desire ridden body that holds us back? If I have already graduated from the body, why would I want to believe in a religion that believes that I will be eternally trapped in a body? Because our present unbiblical

¹ <https://wolffmueller.co/martin-luther-on-enoach/> accessed 7/31/2025

worldviews can hinder us from seeing certain biblical and eternal truths as true and desirable, Paul puts on the teachers hat and does two things. Firstly, in v36-41 he gives us some illustrations arguing for the possibility of our resurrection bodies. Then in v42-49 he draws some conclusions about the glories of our resurrection bodies.

Although we have mentioned the resurrection body many times in our sermons on this chapter, v35 is actually the first time that the word 'body' actually appears in this chapter. This question of needing a new body is a matter that lies close to our hearts. Paul tells us that we groan, 2 Cor. 5:2, 'For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling.' In fact all of creation groans with longing to be set free from our present pain filled; death filled, sin filled existence. The Greek worldview wanted too little in merely wanting to be free from the body, but the bible promises a greater hope that even our bodies too will be glorified. This week we have experienced the death of a loved one; we have looked into the faces of ageing parents; we have fretted over the weakness in our children's bodies; we have felt the deterioration of age in ourselves; we have wrestled with a rebellious flesh that wars against the Spirit, we groan for clean, pure, strong, glorious, sinless, bodily life. Paul is going to tell us that one day, when Jesus returns we will have it in our resurrected bodies.

Arguments illustrating the reality of our resurrection bodies

V36-37, '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.' Here we see Paul beginning to answer the questions of v35, they relate to the nature of the body we will receive. Paul gives two arguments, firstly in v36-37, he will show that from an illustration from agriculture, that just as a seed goes in the ground, dies and is buried in one form, the same seed comes out of the ground as a plant in a different form, so it is with the resurrection body. His point here is that it is the same body but different. His second argument in v38-41 addresses the concern around how can the natural become spiritual? He illustrates that there are indeed heavenly bodies; this is not a contradiction like a square circle. These arguments will then set things up for him to draw conclusions in v42-49.

Paul begins strong, calling the one who denies the possibility of a future glorified body foolish. He appeals to a common analogy all would be familiar with, a seed cannot become a plant unless it dies first. Jesus said something similar in John 12:24, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.' This should not be mistaken to mean that we must all die, Paul does add in v51, 'Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed.' Some will never taste death. Paul is tapping into the first century mindset which is informed by an eye witness perspective. We should not impose our own scientific knowledge that would protest that the seed does not technically die. Paul is not trying to make perfect scientific statements at this point. His point would have been understood at the time. A seed is buried in the ground and appears to die, its existence as a seed ends. But then it rises as a plant, it is the same seed but now it is something different. Paul is using this to establish certain basic ideas concerning our future bodies. Just as it is the same seed but in a different form, my body will die, and my body will be raised in its glorified state. There is both continuity and difference. Continuity but progress.

We do not die to throw away our bodies, our bodies are sown in the grave in hope. Or to put it in terms of the Heidelberg catechism Q1. 'Q. What is your only comfort in life and death?

A. That I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ.' Not only my soul, but my body belongs to Him as well. So this means that we will be raised new, but it is we who will be raised. So there are continuities. Now this has raised all sorts of questions. How old will I be when I am raised; will there be any signs of ageing; will we have the same colour eyes, racial features, hair colour, ability to grow beards, height, etc; will certain bodily functions like eating and drinking and sleeping and going to the toilet continue; will we recognize each other; will we have superhuman powers like teleportation, telekinesis, the ability to fly, pass through walls, change our appearance, these sorts of questions are raised by the realities we see in Jesus own resurrection body. I wish I could answer those questions for us, there does seem to be some things that are peculiar to Jesus own resurrection body that are not necessarily basic to our own mixed in with things that likely hint at what we will be like. He has scars, He willed to hide Himself, His after resurrection appearances seem miraculous not normative, etc. But he was also recognizable, he ate, and he had a fully human body. The same but different, the same but better.

This idea of the natural becoming the supernatural and the supernatural being embodied was a major hurdle so Paul goes on to show that there are in fact earthly and heavenly bodies, v38-41, '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.' Paul includes the most important argument for how our bodies are changed in v38, 'God gives it a body as He has chosen.' God is the Creator, God is all powerful, if He can speak the world into being; or make humanity out of dust, the resurrection of our bodies in a better form is nothing to Him. if God makes natural bodies, and the heavenly ones, what would be so hard about God making spiritual out of natural bodies? Paul working within the assumptions that the first century mind accepted shows that there are in fact different types of bodies, there are earthly and heavenly. Even among earthly bodies there are distinctions. He lists in descending order humans, then animals, then birds, then fish. As we allow the vista of all these bodies to pass before our eyes we cannot help but appreciate the handiwork of God, the creativity of God, the power of God to make all things out of nothing. Then add to that the heavenly bodies, and Paul lists them from the perspective of our observation from brightest to dullest, the sun, the moon, the stars. Taking all of this in we are confronted with the creative power of God. Just think about the sun as we now know it. 1.3 million earths could fit inside the sun; it is a constant ball of nuclear fusion with its core burning at 15 million degrees centigrade; but it is only an average star in the milky way galaxy which has between 100-400 billion stars, it would take the fastest plane 33 ½ billion years to cross the milky way alone; and the guestimates put the number of galaxies in the universe between 100 billion to 2 trillion in the universe. If God can do that from nothing, the concept of making a spiritual body better than this one out of the raw materials of whatever we leave behind is nothing by comparison.

Conclusions highlighting the nature of our resurrection bodies

V42-44, '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.' That word 'so' shows us that Paul is now drawing his conclusions. We see that he immediately applies the language of agriculture and sowing, as per his illustration in v36-37; we also see him showing a continuity but an improvement; he also picks up on the idea that there is both a natural body which is superseded by a spiritual body. What he does now is he allays any fears of being resurrected into something the same or worse, no, he highlights the good news that we will be raised in body like Christ's own resurrection body. Paul gives us four contrasts. Firstly, it is sown, that is it dies and is buried a perishable body but is raised an imperishable body. Perishable or corruptible speaks of a susceptibility to death. We must all die, as Robert Morey said, 'The death rate is still one per person.' It is inescapable, we are all born with a shelf life. No amounts of make up, exercise, healthy eating, surgery, cryogenics or technology can prevent it. We will die. But everything within us longs for immortality, to go on, those who say they do not want to live forever are only saying they do not want to be unhappy and unhealthy forever. But Paul promises us, that because Jesus has resurrected in a body that is imperishable so will we. Secondly, it is sown in dishonor/shame but it is raised in glory. We die in sin, in shame, in dishonor, falling short of the glory of God. Adam was made sinless and pure but he plunged us all into shame. Death is not beautiful, or dignifying, it is a reminder that the wages of sin is death, and a criminal has died. But because Christ has died to pay for our sins, because He is raised in glory, we will be raised in glory too. We will not bear the shame of our guilt, or of our natures which are shameful; we will be raised holy as He is holy. Thirdly, it is sown in weakness, but it is raised in power. Strength fails, beauty fades, we wear out with the years, we are prone to decay and disease. As far as our bodies are concerned we are overcome, we are defeated, we are weak. But our new bodies will be raised powerful, impervious, free from all of the effects of ageing and sickness. These three areas can be seen as the impact of death and sin and decay; and the resurrection reverses all of these.

This is such good news. The pain we feel over lost loved ones; the depression we feel from ageing, the loss of strength and bodily functions, the fading of our memories, daily pain and discomfort; the great sense of meaninglessness that can grip us as we look out over a world that is caught in the grip of sin. All the loss of beauty, and talent, all the people forgotten, the accomplishments that we cannot take with us beyond the grave, how everything we lived for is wrenched out of our hands in death. Here is God's answer to the age long ache of the human heart, Jesus has been raised, and everyone who believes in Him will have all of these things removed in their case when He comes again and resurrects them from the dead.

Fourthly, we sow a natural body, but we will be resurrected in a spiritual body. The fear that the new creation will be a bunch of resuscitated corpses running around is put to bed. The Greek found it hard to conceive of resurrection bodily because they thought it would be back into a body like they already had. No Paul is telling us that we are not merely resuscitated but we are renovated.

V45-49, '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.' Now Paul is doing something wonderful here. We know that there are places where Paul shows us the parity between Adam and Christ. they are both legal representatives, they both act on our behalf, they both acted and brought consequences upon those they represented. Adam brought guilt and death but Christ brought righteousness and life. Paul, as he shows the graduation, the progress from the natural to the spiritual shows us the differences between Adam and Christ. Firstly notice how he describes them. Adam is the first man, and Jesus is the second man, v47. Not only this there is 'the first man Adam' and Jesus is the last Adam. How can Jesus be the second man when Cain and Abel came next? The clue is in the fact that he is given the name Adam as a title, as the last Adam. Jesus and Adam uniquely function to represent a people. Paul paraphrases Gen. 2:7 reminding us that Adam, the first man became a living being but notice the difference that Jesus does not become a living being, he becomes a life giving being, 'the last Adam became a life-giving spirit.' One received life and Jesus gives life. Paul is explaining how we receive our new bodies. Through the finished work of Jesus on the cross and through His resurrection He is made to be the head of the body which is the church. His resurrection life becomes the life that we are united to by the Spirit so that Paul says we are raised with Him. Our baptisms signify this union with Him. But where we Adam received a natural body free from sin at creation, and we received a fallen natural body from him; Christ who was sinless had a natural body but at His resurrection becomes a glorified Saviour. And let it be underlined that Jesus was raised bodily. We deny what the JW's teach that Jesus only experienced a resurrection of the spirit and not the body. The reference to 'spiritual' in these verses does not mean without a body, but rather a new type of body in keeping with the spiritual as opposed to worldly qualities of the new creation.

And here is the wonder. Our present fallen bodies are not restored to an Adamic ideal; no Adam though sinless was not yet glorified. Remember Adam was sinless and in a covenant of works, only if he obeyed would he gain access to the tree of life and gain the glorified body that we now gain through Christ. No, we receive more in Christ than we lost in Adam, we receive a body like Christ's own resurrection body. This is the significance of Adam as a man of dust; and Christ as the man who was always with the Father in heaven before He became incarnate, but who is now ascended and who will return from heaven again. In our resurrection we will not receive a body like Adam's sinless body, but a body that was able to sin and able to die; no we will receive a body like the man of heaven; a glorified that is not able to sin and not able to die.

I don't know about you, not only do I have the idea of a new and better body explained, I want what Paul is describing. Oh how glorious it will be to wake up on that day when He returns to all the wonders of that new body. We will be young and strong and fit and beautiful; but more important than that is we will be without sin, with hearts fitted for worship and obedience; we will not experience any sickness or weakness or death. And more than that we will have bodies fit enough to stand in the presence of God and gaze upon His glory. Our minds will perfectly understand Him; our eyes will perfectly see Him; our hearts will perfectly love Him; our voices will not wear out as we strenuously praise Him. Phil. 3:19-20, 'But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ 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.' ¹
John 3:1-2, 'Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet
appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we
shall see him as he is. ³ And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as
he is pure.'