

THE MERCIES OF GOD: Resurrection

“Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.” —1 Corinthians 15:51-52

Introduction

The doctrine of future resurrection represents the culmination of salvation. At that moment, when believers are made perfectly holy in both soul and body, the plan of redemption reaches its destination. Those whom the Father predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son finally reach that goal, and the Son indeed becomes “the firstborn among many brethren” (Rom 8:29).

It is to be expected that this apex of redemption would be scorned by the unbelieving world. Whether the future resurrection of the dead in general, or the historical resurrection of Jesus in particular, the concept of a dead body raised to new life is consigned to the realm of *myth*. The same world that is willing to believe almost anything ridicules the resurrection as a hoax. This irony is evident in the Athenian response to Paul’s preaching on Mars Hill:

“Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all *people* everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.” Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some *began* to sneer . . . (Acts 17:30-32).

The same learned philosophers who felt comfortable around countless stone idols carved by human hands, and even an altar dedicated “to an unknown god” (Acts 17:23), expressed intense hostility to Paul for proclaiming a sovereign God of righteousness who raised Jesus from the dead.

One of the most prominent sources of this antagonism to the resurrection is the worldview called *platonic dualism*. Espoused by the Greek philosopher Plato (428-347 BC), platonic dualism contends that anything belonging to the material realm is inherently inferior to that belonging to the non-material realm. All of life’s problems can be traced to the material body, not the soul. Death emancipates the soul from its captivity; therefore, what possible benefit could there be to a return of the soul to the body? The highest state of existence can only be the non-material existence.

For their own reasons, the Sadducees of Jesus’ day also rejected the concept of a resurrection (Matt 22:23; Acts 23:6-8). When the Apostle Paul preached before Agrippa, he also expressed skepticism, leading Paul to state, “Why is it considered incredible among you *people* if God does raise the dead?” (Acts 26:8). By the end of the first century, the Apostle John was dealing with an early form of heresy which denied that anything good could be connected to the physical body. These early heretics denied the incarnation of the Son of God (see 1 John 4:1-2; 2 John 7), and by default denied His resurrection as well.

In our day the resurrection is ridiculed by some in the highest levels of Christian scholarship and denominational leadership. For example, an influential bishop in the Episcopal Church, John Shelby Spong, stated,

I do not believe that the deceased body of Jesus was resuscitated physically on the third day and was restored to the life of this world as, at least, the later gospels assert, but I do believe that in him and through him people found a way into that which is eternal and so they portrayed him as breaking through and transcending the limits of death.

An Anglican priest and representative to the Vatican stated, “It is important for Christians to be set free from the idea that the Resurrection was an extraordinary physical event which restored to life Jesus’s earthly body.” And in a recent interview, the head of the Roman Catholic Church, Pope Francis, is reported to have said,

He [Jesus] was a man until he was placed in the tomb by the women who recomposed his body. That night, in the tomb, the man [Jesus] disappeared and came forth from the grotto in the semblance of a spirit that met the women and the Apostles while still preserving the shadow of the person, and then he definitely disappeared.

One recent BBC poll found that 25% of professing Christians in Great Britain deny that Jesus rose again.

But as the Apostle Paul asserted, to deny the resurrection of Jesus is to deny our future resurrection. And if the dead are not raised, the gospel proclaimed in the Bible is worthless (1 Cor 15:16-19). The entire plan of redemption fails.

A. Key Terms and Definitions

There are three terms that are pertinent to our study of the doctrine of future resurrection. The first two of these were covered in the previous session in greater detail (see “Glorification,” 5/13/2020).

1. **“Glorification.”** John Murray provides a succinct definition of the doctrine of glorification: “It is the complete and final redemption of the whole person when in the integrity of body and spirit, the people of God will be conformed to the image of the risen, exalted, and glorified Redeemer, when the very body of their humiliation will be conformed to the body of Christ’s glory” (*Redemption Accomplished & Applied*, 186).

Glorification will occur at the appearing of Jesus Christ (1 John 3:2; Col 3:1-4). It conforms the believer to His glorious likeness (Rom 8:29). It involves the entire existence of the believer—both body and soul, his material and immaterial existence (Rom 8:23; 1 Thess 5:23; Phil 3:20-21). It is accomplished unilaterally by God for all those whom He chose to be recipients of His unmerited grace and glory. It definitively ends all moral and material defects and brings about a state of eternal perfection.

2. **“Intermediate State.”** But what about believers in Jesus Christ who die before the appearing of the Lord? As Matthew Barrett states, “When we breathe our last, it is not the case that we cease to exist or our soul goes to sleep until the time of our bodily resurrection. Rather, our soul goes to be with the Lord in heaven” (*Forty Questions about Salvation*, 342). This period of existence between the believer’s death and his future bodily resurrection—when he exists as a “disembodied soul” in the presence of Jesus Christ—is called *the intermediate state*. It is a state of conscious existence with Jesus Christ in heaven (see Luke 23:42-43; 2 Cor 5:1-8; Phil 1:23-24; 1 Thess 4:14; Heb 12:22-24; Rev 6:9-11). It is a state of perfect sanctification, where all the striving against sin has ceased. Yet it is an incomplete state as the soul anticipates the day it will once again be “clothed.”
3. **“Resurrection.”** Many Christians believe that the most glorious form of existence will be the state they enter immediately at death. Indeed, to “be at home with the Lord” (2 Cor 5:8) in this intermediate state will be glorious, but it is not the final state designed by God for His redeemed. The ultimate comes only when believers receive their glorified bodies, and it is upon this state that Christians are to fix their greatest hope.

For Christians who have died, the reception of this glorified body will take place at the appearing of Jesus Christ when He comes with them to collect His Church. For Christians who are alive at that moment, there will be no experience of death at all; they will receive their glorified bodies instantly. Paul explains this as follows:

For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of *the* archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. (1 Thess 4:14-17; see also 1 Cor 15:51-53.)

As Wayne Grudem explains, this resurrection represents **“a rising from the dead into a new kind of life not subject to sickness, aging, deterioration, or death”** (*Systematic Theology*, 1253). This concept is by no means limited to just a few obscure texts in the New Testament. It is a truth explicitly taught by the Old Testament (Job 19:25-26; Isa 26:19; Dan 12:2). Jesus taught the doctrine of the resurrection—not only with respect to His own rising from the dead, but also with respect to those who believed in Him (e.g., John 6:39-40, 44, 54; 11:23-25). The Apostle Paul taught on it repeatedly (e.g., Rom 8:23; 1 Cor 15; Phil 3:20-21; Col 3:1-4; 1 Thess 5:23). It is such an integral part of God’s plan of redemption that to deny it—whether with respect to Jesus in particular or to believers in general—is to reject the gospel (1 Cor 15:12-19).

“God is not the God of the dead but of the living and therefore nothing short of resurrection to the full enjoyment of God can constitute the glory to which the living God will lead his redeemed.”

—Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 186

B. Essential Characteristics

A survey of Scripture leads to several affirmations regarding the doctrine of the believer's future resurrection:

- 1. The historical resurrection of Jesus is the linchpin of our redemption.** The literal, bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ is a fundamental of the Christian faith. Paul calls it a matter of "first importance" as central to the gospel as the death of Christ (1 Cor 15:3). Jesus' resurrection was necessary to testify to the efficacy of His atonement, and our very justification is contingent upon it (Rom 4:24-25). Therefore, to confess faith in Jesus' resurrection from the dead is the crowning evidence of saving faith (Rom 10:9). Conversely, to deny the fact of His resurrection is to spurn the entire gospel (1 Cor 15:12-19). Emphasizing the relationship between Jesus' resurrection and the plan of redemption as a whole, John MacArthur writes,

The truth of the resurrection gives life to every other area of gospel truth. The resurrection is the pivot on which all of Christianity turns and without which none of the other truths would much matter. Without the resurrection, Christianity would be so much wishful thinking, taking its place alongside all other human philosophy and religious speculation. (*1 Corinthians*, 398)

- 2. Our union with Jesus guarantees our own future resurrection.** Recall the study on "Union with Christ" (2/12/2020). MacArthur and Mayhue define this concept as "a basic dimension of the doctrine of salvation: by being identified with Christ in his atoning death as well as in his resurrection power, believers are credited with his righteousness and share in his holiness" (*Biblical Doctrine*, 938). Thus, by virtue of our union with Him, we have been guaranteed not only life eternal in *spiritual* sense, but life eternal in terms of our *material* composition (see Rom 6:6-10). He is the "first fruits" of resurrection—the first among many brethren (1 Cor 15:20, 23).

"Christ the Lord Is Risen Today" by Charles Wesley, 4th stanza

Soar we now where Christ has led, Alleluia!
Foll'wing our exalted Head, Alleluia!
Made like Him, like Him we rise, Alleluia!
Ours the cross, the grave, the skies, Alleluia!

- 3. Jesus' resurrected body serves as the blueprint for ours.** Certainly, the doctrine of our future resurrection "takes us to the outer limits of Christian knowledge, and leaves us like men standing on the shore watching a boat disappear over the horizon into an experience at which we can only begin to guess" (Sinclair Ferguson, *The Christian Life*, 191). We must be very careful to avoid speculation. However, Scripture does provide us with basic knowledge about what this body will be like. In particular, the testimony given about the nature of Jesus' resurrected body is helpful, since Scripture testifies that "we will be like him" (1 John 3:2; see also 1 Cor 15:49; Phil 3:21). What characteristics does His glorified body have? It is important to note that He appeared as a regular human being—so much so that the disciples on the road to Emmaus initially thought He was just another traveler (Luke 24:13-35). Jesus Himself stated that His body had "flesh and bones" (Luke 24:39), meaning His body continues to have physical characteristics. He ate food (Luke 24:41-43), could be touched, and His body could even be recognized by the marks of His atonement (John 20:26-29).

In addition to the descriptions about Jesus' resurrected body, Scripture also makes several general assertions about what believers can anticipate with respect to their own resurrected bodies: (1) they will be *indestructible* (1 Cor 15:42), meaning that they will not experience sickness, pain, decay, or the possibility of death; (2) they will be *glorious* (1 Cor 15:43a), meaning that there will be no propensity or possibility for sin or any dishonorable purpose, but that they will be attractive, radiant, and perfect; (3) they will be *powerful* (1 Cor 15:43b), meaning that they will be ideally suited to fulfill all the tasks God gives in the new creation, never experiencing fatigue or inability to succeed; and (4) they will be *spiritual* (1 Cor 15:44), meaning not that they will cease to be material in nature, but that they will be in perfect harmony with the Spirit's guidance.

"Our resurrection bodies will show the fulfillment of God's perfect wisdom in creating us as human beings who are the pinnacle of his creation and the appropriate bearers of his likeness and image. In these resurrection bodies we will clearly see humanity as God intended it to be."

—Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 832

4. **Our experience of resurrection will be a corporate one.** Until this point in the experience of salvation, every component of the Spirit's application of redemption is *individual* in nature. Our conversion occurred at a moment and in circumstances that were unique to each one of us. Our sanctification progresses at a pace in our Christian lives that is unique to each of us. The resurrection, however, is a *corporate experience* (1 Thess 4:14-17). We will share this experience with the other saints of the Church age.
5. **Our rewards will be conferred only once we are in our glorified bodies.** The New Testament writers draw a distinction between the *gift* of eternal life (based solely upon the merits of Jesus Christ), and the *rewards* believers will receive for good works done by faith. However, in the effort to protect the church from the false gospel of works-based salvation, the doctrine of reward is often neglected. But Scripture clearly teaches it (e.g., 1 Cor 3:12-15; 4:5; 15:58). These rewards will be given at the *Bema* or "judgement seat" of Christ (2 Cor 5:9-10), after the resurrection/glorification of Church-age saints. It is fascinating to note that the good works done by the Christian *in the flesh* in this life will receive the appropriate rewards *in the flesh* of the new life to come.
6. **The promise of the resurrection soothes our present experiences of suffering.** The Apostle Paul says it best: "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Rom 8:18); and "For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison" (2 Cor 4:17). Sometimes we handle suffering and pain as if it will be the only experience we will ever have in the body. This is certainly not the case. Knowing that the present body is only temporary, and that the body to come will be eternal and glorious, helps put the pains and sufferings of this present life in proper perspective.
7. **The final glorification of the believer puts God's glory on greatest display.** Anthony Hoekema says it well: "Nothing in all of history will reveal the fulness of God's perfections as brilliantly as will the completed glorification of his people" (*Saved by Grace*, 232). What we currently experience in terms of salvation is only the down payment (Eph 1:13-14; 4:30), yet even in this experience the power, grace, and love of God is put on amazing display. Imagine, then, what will be when we receive the full payment of our salvation! The revelation of God's glory in that culminating act will be far greater than we could ever know and experience now. The best is yet to come, and it is far more glorious than our minds can currently conceive.

For Further Reflection

Scripture Memory: 1 Corinthians 15:51-52

Recommended Reading:

- MacArthur & Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, pages 653-659.
- Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, chapter 42, "Glorification," pages 828-839.
- John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, pages 185-193.

Homework:

- Over the coming week, read through 1 Corinthians 15 several times. Make observations about the importance Paul places on the doctrine of resurrection, and about the encouragement Paul draws from it.
- Why do you think Paul adds the exhortation in 1 Corinthians 15:58 after he has spent the previous 57 verses explaining the doctrine of resurrection? What is the relationship?
- How should the Bible's teaching about the rewards given at the judgment seat of Christ (see #5 under "Essential Characteristics" above, along with the listed references) motivate us in our present lives?
- Does the Bible's teaching about future resurrection impact how you approach the topic of pain and suffering in your life today? If not, how should it?
- Read the history behind the hymn, "The Sands of Time Are Sinking" by Anne Ross Cousin, found here: <https://founders.org/2015/12/28/the-sands-of-time-are-sinking/>. Carefully read through all 19 original stanzas of this hymn and let them stir you to long for the Lamb in all His glory.

Hymns: "The Sands of Time Are Sinking" (*Hymns of Grace* #427)

This Week's Audio: gracechurch.org/motw