

“Foundations: Salvation and Resurrection”

1 Corinthians 15:12-19, 37-44, 50-58

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Scripture: 1 Corinthians 15:12-19, 37-44, 50-58

Sermon:

Introduction

In 1817, [pic] the British Museum acquired some massive fragments of a statue of the Egyptian Pharaoh Ramesses II. Inspired by the announcement, the poet Percy Shelley, wrote the poem Ozymandias, another name for Ramesses.

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:
And on the pedestal these words appear:
'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away."

The poem talks about the fact that even mighty empires come and go, in spite of the claims of their rulers. In stark contrast to the kingdoms of this world that come and go, Jesus lays claim to a kingdom that has no end.

Today, we may not all have the means to try to establish a kingdom that will outlast us. Few of us have the financial resources to build towers that carry our name. [pic] But we, too, have a desire to outlast time.

Have you ever been to a drug store? [pic] Of course you have. Have you ever taken a look at the products they sell? Have you ever noticed just how many of those products have to do with trying to fight the aging process? Such things as anti-aging cream, hair dye, hair-growth formulas, wrinkle concealers and the like. It's one thing to buy products that keep us clean. It's another thing to buy products that keep us young.

Why do we hate aging so much? Why do we fear growing old? I've heard it said, "Everybody wants to live forever, but nobody wants to grow old." We hate aging in our culture. Why? Because it's a reminder of our mortality. It's a reminder that we will eventually die. Regardless of how skilled we become as a society at putting off death, delaying it and its effects, eventually we will all die.

Why does that bother us so? Certainly, all animals have an instinct for self-preservation. When faced with danger, animals have responses designed to preserve their lives. But I think the human fascination with and fear of aging is different. I think it is actually a sign of something much deeper. I believe it is more than just self-preservation. I think it's linked to the desire to build empires and monuments that will outlast us. I think it's because we were not designed to grow old and die. We were designed to know God and enjoy him forever. Death is not what we were built for and on some level, whether we acknowledge it or not, we rebel against death because we know that was not what God designed us for.

Today we are going to talk about the resurrection. The Christian doctrine of the resurrection is central to Christianity, but we rarely talk much about it. The resurrection means a lot more than going to heaven when you die. **The resurrection is about being re-embodied after we experience life after death without a body.** Jesus experienced this in the days between his crucifixion and resurrection on Easter Sunday. There is evidence in the NT that when believers die they do go to be with Jesus. But there is even more discussion that when Christ returns, those who have died knowing Christ (and probably everybody else) will be resurrected. They will be given new bodies, similar to but distinct from their old bodies. As one NT scholar puts it, **the resurrection is**

about life after life after death. (NT Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, p. 148)

That sounds pretty far out, doesn't it? Have you ever heard about that before, even in Christian circles? Yes, we talk about life after death. We talk about going to heaven when we die. In fact, that is a frequent evangelistic technique in some circles, "If you were to die tonight, do you know you would go to heaven?"

But Christianity is about far more than going to heaven when we die. And there are a lot of misconceptions about what Christians believe about what happens after death, even amongst Christians. We are going to begin to unravel a few of these misconceptions today, even if we don't touch on all of them.

For instance, do you believe we will get wings when we go to heaven? If somebody asked you that, would you know how to answer them? Do we become angels when we die? (Do angels even have wings? But that's for another day!)

Is the resurrection actually a big deal? Isn't Christianity more about faith and justification, about living for Jesus and sharing the good news? Isn't the resurrection more of a secondary doctrine?

Even in Paul's day, there were questions about the resurrection. Paul had to correct the church in Corinth about a number of things concerning the resurrection, and we're going to look at a few of those things today. We are going to address three particular points about the Christian doctrine of the resurrection, each taken from 1 Corinthians 15. Those three aspects are:

- 1) **The central nature of the resurrection to Christianity**
- 2) **What is the resurrection body like?**
- 3) **Why the resurrection matters today**

In order to do this, we have three different chunks of 1 Corinthians 15 to examine. In order to keep track of where we are, and to keep track of what Paul says, we are going to look at these three chunks individually. So instead of reading all the scripture passages together, we're going to read one, talk about it, read the second, talk about it and then read the third and talk about that.

Context

Now, to help us get a handle on what Paul is saying, let me give you some context. The church in Corinth was filled with many spectacular spiritual gifts. It was also filled with conflict and division, mostly over those same gifts. There was conflict within the church itself, and conflict between the church and Paul. One of the errors some of the Corinthians had fallen into was what it means to be "spiritual." They thought that spirituality was about the spectacular spiritual gifts and that it had nothing to do with the body, or with the physical nature of our existence. **The Corinthians fell into the error of thinking Christian spirituality has nothing to do with our bodies.** They fell into two extremes in this error. On one end of the spectrum, married couples had given up having sex together, which was damaging their relationships. On the other end of the spectrum, Christians were having sex with anybody and everybody. In both cases, the error arose because they thought that our bodies don't matter.

Not only did they fall into sexual sin in their mistake, but they also struggled to imagine that our future existence with Christ would have any physical component to it. They couldn't imagine a physical resurrection. They found the idea of a dead body being resurrected disgusting and hard to fathom. [Gordon Fee, *1 Corinthians*, p. 776] As a result, they started to deny the future resurrection of believers. They concluded that our bodies didn't matter in our Christian experience of life, and that at death we would shed our bodies and go to live with Jesus in a spiritual, but not a physical form.

To address these mistakes, Paul sets out at the beginning of Chapter 15 by reminding them of the bodily resurrection of Jesus himself. Then, in verses 12-19, he connects Jesus' resurrection in the past with our resurrection in the future.

Text 1

Let's read together 1 Corinthians 15:12-19

Part 1 – The Centrality of the Resurrection

Having just reminded his readers of the centrality of Jesus' resurrection to the gospel as well as in Paul's own preaching, Paul now hits the Corinthians right between the eyes about our own resurrection in the future. He says that to deny the future resurrection of believers is to deny the past resurrection of Christ. (Notice, by the way, that Paul says nothing about the resurrection of non-believers. This doesn't mean non-believers won't be

raised. It means that it wasn't central to Paul's point at the time.)

Paul begins by saying that to claim there is no resurrection of the dead means that there was no resurrection of Jesus on Easter. That is a very dangerous road to go down! Paul says that our resurrection is intimately intertwined with Jesus' resurrection. If one resurrection, then the other. If no resurrection of us, then no resurrection of Jesus. We will be resurrected if Jesus was resurrected. If we will not be resurrected, then Jesus wasn't resurrected.

Christianity rises and falls on the resurrection of Jesus in the past and of us in the future. Paul says that if there is no resurrection in the future, there was no resurrection in the past. If Jesus wasn't raised in the past, then several things follow. First, it means our faith and Paul's preaching are futile. Literally, futile means empty. [Fee, p. 742] The whole message of the Apostles, upon which the whole Christian faith is based, is that God raised Jesus from the dead. That is the truth that turned frightened Apostles, hiding in the upper room on Saturday, into bold and fearless evangelists testifying in the Temple and staring down the Jewish ruling council. That was the core of Peter's message on the Day of Pentecost and it has been the core of the gospel ever since.

Second, we are still in our sins. Why? Because **the resurrection is God's testimony vindicating Jesus.** The resurrection of Jesus shows that he was without sin, that he is the Son of God, that his death was able to pay for our sin. In more technical terms, the resurrection is proof of the Atonement and opens the door for our justification if we put our faith in Jesus' atoning death.

What Paul is saying is that to deny their future, "that they are destined for resurrection on the basis of Christ's resurrection, has the net effect of a denial of their past, that they have received forgiveness of sins on the basis of Christ's death." [Fee, p. 743] **That Christ died "for us," along with what that means in terms of justification with God, is so intimately tied to his resurrection that to deny one is to deny the other.**

Third, if Jesus wasn't raised, then the Apostles are all liars. Not only that, but they have borne false witness against God himself. Why? Because they all claim that God raised Jesus from the dead. So if that's not true, then they've been lying about what God did.

Fourth, if this is the case, that there is no resurrection of the dead, then our faith is useless and we have no hope. Our faith is useless, or empty, because, as we've seen, Christ's atonement for our sin, his opening the way for our justification, is permanently connected to his resurrection. So our faith in Christ is empty if he didn't, in fact, pay the penalty for our sin. Our faith is empty if, in fact, there is no justification from God coming through the blood of Christ. Our faith is empty and we have no hope for the future. What hope do we have for salvation if we are left to our own devices to conquer sin? What hope do those Christians have who have already died? The Corinthians believed that dead Christians had already shed their bodies and begun their spiritual existence with Jesus. But not so, Paul says, if Christ was not raised from the dead having paid for their sins in the cross! [Fee, p. 744]

If the only hope we have as Christians is for this life alone, that somehow following Christ improves our quality of life here and now, then we are to be most pitied! Think about Paul's context for saying that. Today, in the West, Christians are the majority and the persecution we face is minimal. But in Paul's day, Christians were being thrown in prison, like Paul himself, and were being executed for their faith. Christianity did very little to improve the "here and now" aspects of many of the early believers' lives.

But the Corinthians, and we too, have experienced the power of the Holy Spirit. We know that power that raised Christ from the dead. We know Christ was resurrected and so we know, too, that we will be resurrected. The power of Paul's argument lies not just in the logical sequence, but in the absurdity of denying the power of the risen Christ. The Christians in Corinth had all seen and experienced the Holy Spirit's power. They knew that the Spirit's presence was the result of Christ's work on the cross. They knew Jesus had been resurrected. So they would now understand that our future resurrection is guaranteed based on the past resurrection of Jesus. They are inextricable.

Text 2

Now, having seen the centrality of the resurrection to Christianity, let's take a look at what the resurrection body will be like. Let's read verses 37-44.

Part 2 – The Resurrection Body

The Corinthians themselves were wondering what our resurrected bodies would be like. Remember, they

were disturbed by the idea of a reanimated corpse. It's probably safe to say that they would nod in agreement with the idea of a Zombie Jesus. They thought the idea of a bodily resurrection absurd.

Thus, Paul uses the example of seeds to illustrate how our physically resurrected bodies will be different from our current bodies. [pic] A seed, when planted, looks nothing like the tree or plant it will become. Yet, there is a continuity between the two. God transforms the seed into the plant, giving it the form he designed. In the same way, God will take the "seed" of our bodies and transform them, through the resurrection, into something he designed that will fit within our future existence in the New Creation. [Fee, p. 786]

Paul uses a second illustration, that of heavenly bodies. [pic] There are a variety of heavenly bodies, like the sun, the moon and the stars. Each has tremendous splendour, or glory to it, but their glory is different from one another. In the same way, our resurrected bodies will all be glorious, but there will be variety in their glory or splendour.

Paul goes on to explicitly detail some of the transformative effects of the resurrection. Picking up on his seed illustration, that which was "sown" or "planted," perishable, dishonourable, weak and natural, will be raised imperishable, glorious, powerful and spiritual.

And no, we will not have wings! We will not be angels when we die. We will be human beings. We will still be human, but our understanding of what being human means will be radically altered and improved. So many of the effects of living in a world affected by sin will be gone, some of which we can't even anticipate now because we are so steeped in the consequences of the Fall.

This idea, though, of a variety of splendour in resurrected bodies is consistent with what we see of God in creation already. God loves variety! It makes sense that the New Creation will exhibit at least as much variety as the present creation. This whole chapter, in fact, makes repeated allusions to Genesis 1-3, including references to Adam in a section we're not examining today. **This discussion of the resurrection is, in part, "a theology of the new creation, not of the abandonment of creation."** [NT Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, p. 155]

"At stake is the biblical doctrine of creation. According to Scripture, God created the material order and pronounced it good. But in the Fall, it also came under the curse. In Paul's view, therefore, the material order must also experience the effects of redemption in Christ, and that involved the physical body as well." [Fee, p. 778] God promises a new heaven and a new earth, that is, a new creation. Jesus came to redeem fallen creation. That means he came to redeem the physical world, including our physical bodies. **Salvation is not an escape from the physical, but a redemption of the physical.**

This is why it matters what we do with our bodies. This is why Christian spirituality has to do with our physical bodies. Think of it- part of Christian spirituality is meeting the physical needs of others. The early church was known for its agape love, which was demonstrated in part by the feeding of widows. Why did Jesus' ministry, and the Apostles' ministry too, have so much to do with the healing of the sick? Because Christian spirituality has to do with the redemption of the physical world, not an escape from it.

There are many in our church family these days whose experience of their physical existence is increasingly painful or difficult. We have a wide range of people in our church who are battling cancer, organ failure, arthritis, blood clots and a host of other examples of the breakdown of our physical bodies. Even something as simple as all the cases of cold and flu that have run through our church over the past month testify to the frailty of our physical bodies in their current form. For many, the thought of escaping their physical body is a welcome thought. I can understand that. But Christianity ups the ante. Christianity doesn't just promise escape from the physical body, as if it were a shell to be discarded so the "true" self could exist unencumbered. Christianity promises the redemption of the body, the resurrection of the body, a transformation of the body into something imperishable and glorious.

In this way, Christianity is very different from Eastern religions that anticipate an escape from the physical world to become one with the universe. It is different from so many religions, in fact, in these terms. Christianity isn't about going to heaven when you die. It's about Jesus redeeming creation when he returns. The "new Jerusalem" of Revelation comes down to earth. The saints weren't carried up to it in the sky. Paul does say we are going to meet Jesus in the air, but he doesn't mean that we're going to stay there. Jesus is returning to earth. We're going meet him in the air to return to the ground with him! We are not destined to leave the earth behind forever, but to inhabit a redeemed earth in our resurrected bodies that will no longer break down and decay. This

is part of the splendour of the resurrected body!

Text 3

This brings us to our final passage, verses 50-58. Please open your Bibles again with me and read along.

Part 3- Why The Resurrection Matters Today

So what do we care about the resurrection today? What effect does the future resurrection on our living here and now? If it's likely to happen after we're already dead, do we really have to concern ourselves with it before we die? Or is it just an obscure doctrine that theologians ponder that doesn't have practical application?

Today is Palm Sunday. (Some of you may have been wondering if I was even going to mention that!) On Palm Sunday, Jesus entered Jerusalem to the happy shouts of the crowds. They sang out, "Hosanna! Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" [John 12:13] Hosanna literally means "save." It was used as a term of praise by Jesus' day, but literally the people were shouting out "Save us! Save us!" And they fully believed that Jesus was the coming Saviour. But, as is usually preached about on Palm Sunday, they expected Jesus to be the wrong kind of saviour. What did they want Jesus to save them from? Anybody know? [Roman rule]

They expected Jesus to be a political and military saviour. They expected him to save them from their immediate problem of a foreign occupying force. But Jesus came to save them, and us, from a problem much bigger than the Roman army, or occupying forces, or any other problem that comes and goes with history. The Roman Empire, for all its glory and power, has not lasted. Like the poem I read at the beginning, Ozymandias, the statues of Roman emperors lie broken and buried, or are curiosities in museums in other countries and empires.

[pic] Jesus came to save us from a much deeper, much more insidious problem. Jesus came to save us from sin itself. And to do that, he had to die in our place. That puts a new twist on the "palm" of Palm Sunday! And the evidence of his work on the cross lies in the resurrection itself. Jesus came to break the power of sin. The greatest evidence of the power of sin is death itself. One of the most powerful indicators of the effect of death on creation is decay.

We are now living in the "in between times" between the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of all humanity. The second, the resurrection of humanity, will happen "at the last trumpet" as Paul says, or at the return of Christ. When Jesus returns in glory, those who have died will be resurrected with their new, transformed bodies. Those alive will be transformed instantly. It is not a process. It is not a gradual change. It is "in the twinkling of an eye." Why? Because when Jesus returns, the Kingdom of God will be established in its fullness.

Remember, as we've talked about numerous times before, **the Kingdom of God does not refer to a realm, but to the authority and rule of God.** Paul says that "flesh and blood" cannot inherit the Kingdom of God. What he means by that is that our current bodies, "flesh and blood," are subject to decay and death. They are affected by the ravages of sin. They are not compatible with the perfect rule of God in which there is no sin, therefore no decay and no death. At the return of Christ, the Kingdom of God, the rule of God will be finally fully established on earth and our broken, decaying bodies will no longer fit. **So our bodies will be transformed to fit the new reality of the sinless, deathless rule of God.**

Paul describes the resurrected bodies of the dead and the transformed bodies of the living as "imperishable." He says the "mortal" must be clothed with the immortal. This is about our bodies being changed so that they no longer decay and die. That is what it means to be imperishable and immortal.

Now, realize, our experience of everything physical this side of the return of Christ is that physical means temporary or impermanent. This is why the Corinthians couldn't fathom a resurrected physical body. They thought of physical as being impermanent. But what Paul is saying is that when Christ returns, our physical bodies will be made permanent, eternal, immortal and imperishable.

How so? Look at what he says about death. "Death has been swallowed up in victory," he says. He goes on to say, "'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?'" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law." But, as Paul has argued again and again, in Christ the law has been fulfilled. In Christ, sin has been paid for. So in Christ, the sting of death – sin- has been removed. **The victory of death is gone because death has been swallowed up in the victory of Jesus on the cross and in his resurrection.**

Sin leads to death and decay. That affects our physical bodies, causing them to break down and stop functioning. It leads to physical death. But Jesus' victory over sin means a change is coming. At the resurrection, in the future, Jesus' victory over sin will be brought to completion. This completing will mean an end to death and decay, which, being the result of sin, have no place in the rule of God, known as God's Kingdom.

God isn't going to rescue us out of creation. He is going to purge creation of sin, death and decay. We are going to be given new bodies that will fit with, be compatible with, God's perfect, complete rule on earth, with no sin, death or decay. No rust or moth will destroy.

This is why the resurrection matters today. Look at how Paul concludes. He says, "stand firm. Let nothing move you." Why? Because we have a vague home some day in the future? No! He says, "Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain." What does that mean? Often, we've reduced this to mean we will get rewards in heaven, jewels in our crown. But that's to reduce what Paul is saying. Our labour is not in vain. Why? Because our labour *in the Lord*, is going to count in the new creation. Emphasis must lie on labour "in the Lord." The things we do within the character and nature of Jesus, here and now, are part of the new creation. They are part of the Kingdom of God. They will not be erased when Jesus returns. They will last and continue when he returns to establish the full rule of God, the full Kingdom of God! The things we do now *in the Lord* are precursors of the coming Kingdom of God. They matter now because they will matter then. **Our work in the Lord now is actually part of the Kingdom of God, which will be fully established when Christ returns.**

This is why matter matters to God. This is why the physical matters. This is why Christian spirituality includes the physical. This is why we are to honour our bodies as the dwelling place of the Spirit. This is why we are to honour the bodies of others, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, healing the sick, visiting those in prison. Because the body matters. Salvation in Christianity is not about escaping the body, but the redemption of the body. So meeting people's physical needs is just as vital as meeting their spiritual needs. (Not more important than meeting their spiritual needs, but just as important.)

Over the past month, at our Thursday night vision meetings, we've been reviewing a new vision statement, "**We see broken people becoming whole through the love of Christ.**" Part of accomplishing that vision is our mission, which in part reads, "To love our neighbours by meeting their physical and spiritual needs." Remember, agape love is a divine, self-giving love that is primarily concerned with the well-being of others, in particular their spiritual well-being, but not *only* their spiritual well-being. Agape love includes caring for people's physical well-being (along with their emotional and social well-being). **Evangelism that incorporates meeting people's physical needs actually embodies (pardon the pun) the Kingdom of God.** Meeting physical needs should never just be an "evangelistic hook" to get people in the door. It should always be based on the truth that we will be resurrected in the future. Our bodies matter now because they will matter in the future too. Matter matters to God.

This is where Christianity differs from so many other religions. In Christianity, creation will be redeemed. It will be fixed. The stain of our sin will be removed. In so many other religions, the physical is discarded. The expectation is that life after death will be as eternally disembodied spirits. That's what JW's believe. They believe we will exist as disembodied souls. They actually deny the physical resurrection of Christ, citing the apostles' failure to recognize him at times as evidence that he wasn't a physical being. [Walter Martin, *Kingdom of the Cults*, p. 54] Even in Islam and Mormonism, which hold to a bodily resurrection, there is no sense of a redemption of creation. In Islam, paradise is completely other than creation. In Mormonism, there is a whole network of heavens and, hopefully, if you're good enough, you become a god and get your own planet to populate with all your goddess wives.

Only Christianity values our bodies and the physical world while holding in appropriate tension the extensive damage our sinfulness has done. Only Christianity holds out hope for people in both aspects of existence, physical as well as spiritual. Praise be to God that he not only made us physical beings, but his plan of salvation includes the salvation of us physically as well as spiritually. Praise God for salvation from sin. Praise God for the resurrection. Truly, Jesus is the one who saves. Hosanna! Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Amen.