

7. Paul concluded his treatment of the resurrection of the body by affirming its *necessity*. God has brought it about in Christ and determined that men should share in it in Him. This glorious truth is a matter of praise and thanksgiving, and one which ought to encourage and strengthen the saints in their faith, constancy and labor of love (15:51-58).

a. The reason for the Corinthians' concern with bodily resurrection is unclear; what is clear is that those who were objecting to it were doing so on the basis of wrong thinking. For Paul's treatment indicates that they thought physical death argues against – and perhaps even precludes – resurrection. It made no rational sense to them that a decomposed body could be brought back to life; and even if God could do such a thing, why would He and why would any Christian want his corpse to be raised from the dead? Paul countered this thinking by insisting that the body that is raised is not the body that goes into the ground and decays.

- There is a fundamental *ontological* connection between the two bodies in that a person's resurrection body corresponds to the physical identity God has assigned to him or her. God formed each human being as a unique person in his body as well as his spirit, and He has appointed the whole person to be conformed to the consummate humanness of the resurrected Christ. The body that is raised is not the body that dies, but it *is* the consummate form of the physical identity God assigned to that person.

- There is ontological continuity between the natural and spiritual (resurrection) bodies, but no *physical* connection between them. Indeed, they are of entirely different sorts (15:42-49). This is so much the case that the resurrection body utterly depends upon the demise and destruction of the physical body which precedes and anticipates it; the ultimate life bound up in the plant cannot come forth unless the seed is destroyed.

And so, while some at Corinth were concerned that death is contrary to bodily resurrection, Paul assured them that death is the necessary precursor to resurrection. But if this is so, then an entirely different quandary emerges.

- The Corinthians had thought that death argues against resurrection; now, based on Paul's instruction, the opposite appears to be true: *Life – which is to say, the absence of physical death – seems to preclude resurrection.*

- And, if this is the case, then it is those Christians who are *alive* at the Parousia who will not be able to partake in resurrection. Ironically, the Corinthians had been focusing on death in their consideration of the truth of resurrection; now it seemed that life might be the actual impediment to the resurrection of the body.

Paul anticipated this conclusion and addressed himself to it. There will indeed be living believers at Christ's Parousia; the only way it could otherwise be is if people had long-since stopped coming to faith or all Christians had somehow been killed.

But in fact at least some Christians will be alive at Jesus' appearing, and Paul acknowledged this to be the case. But this doesn't argue against his contention that the destruction of the natural body must precede the emergence of the spiritual body. The Corinthians needed to understand that "*not all will sleep, but all will be changed*" (15:51).

The first thing to note about Paul's assertion is that he was again employing the noun *sleep* as a euphemism for physical death (ref. 15:6, 18, 20; cf. also 11:30 and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-15). The second thing is the nature of the *change* Paul referred to. In context, it's obvious that he was speaking of the replacement of the Christian's natural body with his spiritual one. This is all the more evident from the verb Paul used: It denotes an exchange or transition from one entity to another, either through radical alteration or replacement. At the same time, it connotes some sort of essential or functional correspondence between the two entities (cf. Acts 6:14; Romans 1:23; Galatians 4:20; Hebrews 1:12).

Paul's point, then, was two-fold: On the one hand, he acknowledged that some believers will be alive at Christ's appearing; on the other, these living saints will not fall short of the resurrection of the body which Paul assigned to the Parousia event (ref. again 15:20-23). The living and dead will be raised. This parallels the message he had for the Thessalonians. In their case, they weren't struggling with the truth and particulars of bodily resurrection, but were concerned that those saints who died prior to Christ's Parousia would be left out of the resurrection altogether (ref. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). Though for a different reason than the Corinthians, the Thessalonians, too, needed to be reassured that the dead in Christ will not – indeed, cannot – miss out on the resurrection of the body at Jesus' appearing. Taken together, these two passages highlight three important truths:

- 1) First, they show that the bodily resurrection of all saints, living and dead, will occur as a miraculous and instantaneous metamorphosis – a complete transformation occurring in the time it takes for an eye to blink.
- 2) Second, this bodily resurrection occurs at the same time for all of the saints. Not only are the living and dead saints equally appointed to share in resurrection bodies, this resurrection occurs for all of them at the time of Jesus' Parousia at the end of the age (ref. again 15:23).
- 3) Third, this simultaneous bodily resurrection of all who belong to Christ corresponds to what is commonly referred to as the *Rapture*. This points to the corollary truth that the rapture event corresponds to the "end" in which death is destroyed, evidenced in the saints' bodily resurrection and the renewal of the material creation. And having thus abolished death and restored all things to God, the Son delivers up the kingdom to His Father that God should be "all in all" (cf. 15:23-28 with Romans 8:18-25). Nowhere does Paul's scenario suggest – or even allow for – a "catching away" of Christians to await a later return and millennial kingdom.

Christians who are alive at Jesus' appearing will also experience the resurrection of their bodies. And, as suggested above, this doesn't at all argue against the truth that the natural body must perish and be done away in order for the spiritual body to be raised. In the case of the living saints, there is an instantaneous "putting off" of the natural body and "putting on" of the spiritual body, *but this deathless event is no less the natural body's demise and destruction*. Paul's commentary on this event makes this abundantly clear (15:52-53).

- At Jesus' appearing, the trump will sound (as an assembly signal; cf. Isaiah 27:12f; Matthew 24:29ff) and "the dead will be raised incorruptible and we shall be changed." Some see Paul here distinguishing between the living and dead saints, *but, even so, he has both undergoing the same transformation*. *All* must put off corruption and mortality (v. 53); all must be liberated from their Adamic physical self, whether or not their bodies have died (v. 51). They must "put off" their natural physicality, but in order to be clothed with their true physicality: the truly human physicality of the new creation which characterizes Jesus' own resurrection body.
- This "putting off" and "putting on" is an instantaneous transformation. It is a creative fiat performed by the Creator-Spirit, and by this divine miracle all of the saints – living and dead – are fully and forever *changed*.
- All Christians must participate in this work of re-creation, for all are still characterized by *death*. It makes no difference whether the natural body is still animated or has perished and been consumed by decay; in terms of their *physicality*, death still defines every believer. Until they are made to share in Jesus' glorified physicality, Christians' resurrection – their life out of death – remains incomplete. In that respect, they are yet given over to corruption and mortality, whatever the state of their natural bodies. They must yet put on incorruption and immortality; they must yet bear the image of the heavenly Adam, the Second Man (15:53; cf. vv. 48-49).

This dynamic of resurrection was fundamental to Paul's gospel which he preached in all the churches of the saints, and yet he recognized it to be a profound *mystery* (15:51). And it is mysterious, not merely because it is strange, but because it transcends human understanding and is beyond human discovery. The resurrection of the body – as also the resurrection of the spirit (John 3:1-8) – is a divine work which transcends natural laws and processes and human experience. It is not subject to empirical scrutiny and analysis; it is a miracle in the true sense. Not unlike Nicodemus' error respecting the new birth, the Corinthians were seeking to understand the matter of resurrection on the basis of natural categories and considerations. Even the concepts of incorruption and immortality cannot be understood in this way; they speak to qualities that inhere in God Himself and which He grants to His creatures as they are made to share in His own life. They speak to existence in the realm of the divine; existence in a form and manner beyond man's present ability to discern (1 Corinthians 2:6-10).