

The Resurrection of the Body

Why? How? And When?

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Benjamin Franklin, in a 1789 letter to Jean Baptiste Le Roy, wrote "... in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes." For centuries, people have searched for a way to escape both. Many have found loopholes that allow them to keep the government from taking their piece of the pie, and there are at least two Biblical examples of those who cheated death. There remains, however, one inevitability in life – resurrection. While theologians may argue about some of the nuances around the details of when our corpses will be raised from the grave and how they will be transformed from mortality to immortality, the fact remains incontestable that life does not end with the passing of the human body.

The resurrection of the body is one of the most important and clearly attested truths in all of Scripture, extending back to the days of the patriarchs. Job affirms his belief in the doctrine saying, "As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will take His stand on the earth. Even after my skin is destroyed, yet from my flesh I shall see God."¹ The writer of Hebrews tells us that Abraham "considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead."² King David lived in confident expectation of a bodily resurrection when he wrote, "Therefore my heart is glad and my glory rejoices; my flesh also will dwell securely. For You will not abandon my soul to Sheol; nor will You allow Your Holy One to undergo decay."³ The hope of resurrection is echoed by the prophet Isaiah, who said "Your dead will live; their corpses will rise. You who lie in the dust, awake and shout for joy, for your dew is as the dew of the dawn, and the earth will give birth to the departed spirits."⁴

This rich history is not lost on the people of the New Testament. According to Grudem, "People who for years had meditated on and believed these statements of Scripture (such as

¹ Job 19:25-26

² Hebrews 11:19

³ Psalm 16:9-10

⁴ Isaiah 26:19

Martha in John 11:24) were prepared to receive the full-fledged New Testament teaching on the resurrection eagerly, for it simply provided more detail and more assurance for what they already had believed.”⁵ When Jesus was on the earth, He taught of a universal future resurrection: “Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment.” Christ’s own triumph over the grave also provided the means and the model for the believer’s resurrection as the final step in God’s redemptive process. In his defense before Felix, Paul confirmed the concept of multiple resurrections when he stated, “there shall certainly be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked.”⁶ The writers of the New Testament gave us further affirmation and description as to the significance and nature of resurrection, as well as clues to help us piece together the order for the future resurrections that are to take place.

The first question one might ask is “why does the resurrection of the body matter?” The apostle Paul gives a concise answer to this: “For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins.” The ultimate conclusion he draws from this premise is one of pity and despair. Without a doctrine of physical resurrection, the Bible is not a reliable record, those who wrote it and follow it are deluded victims, and Jesus Christ is a complete fraud. The fact of the resurrection is central to the Christian faith, placed on equal footing with the death of Christ on the cross for our sins.⁷ Indeed, all of creation looks forward to the time when it will experience the inescapable reality of transformation from death to life, and from corruption to glory.⁸

⁵ Grudem, p. 831

⁶ Acts 24:15

⁷ I Corinthians 15:3-4

⁸ Romans 8:19-22

A second question to consider is “what will our resurrection bodies be like?” Paul makes a clear connection between the mortal and the immortal body, comparing the relationship to that of a seed and the plant that grows out of it.⁹ Packer notes that this continuity “allows for great differences between the starting point and the end product.”¹⁰ After His resurrection, Jesus’ appearance was different enough to be easily disguised, but retained enough of His attributes as to be easily recognizable to those who knew Him best.¹¹ From these accounts as well as those from the Mount of Transfiguration and the saints raised at the time of Christ’s crucifixion, we know that our resurrection bodies will be physical and recognizable. Just as in life our ultimate model is Jesus, and we are to follow Him in death and burial through baptism, so will we become like Him in the transforming power of the resurrection.¹² While Paul uses the characteristics of perishable, weak, dishonorable and natural to describe our current bodies, he assures us our new bodies will be raised “imperishable,” “in glory,” “in power” and “spiritual”.¹³

A third question – one with a much more complex answer – is “when will the resurrection of our bodies take place?” Scripture teaches that although all will be raised, not all will be raised at the same time nor in the same condition. Both Paul and John indicate that there is a particular sequence and ordinality to the events of the resurrection. In one of the primary passages to delineate this concept we read the following:

“But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep. For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ's at His coming...”¹⁴

⁹ I Corinthians 15:35-38

¹⁰ Packer, p. 255

¹¹ John 20:14-29

¹² Philippians 3:21

¹³ I Corinthians 15:42-44

¹⁴ I Corinthians 15:20-23

Just as the festival of first fruits was celebrated at the beginning of the harvest as a pledge of the greater harvest to come, so the resurrection of Christ is a promise to all who die trusting Him that they be raised again in the future. The first group of believers to follow Jesus in bodily resurrection could be symbolized by the general harvest. They are comprised of the saints of the church – first the dead *in Christ* and then those who are still alive at His return immediately after.¹⁵ The second group of believers could be symbolized by the gleanings and will be resurrected at the end of the Great Tribulation, which follows the rapture. According to the prophecy at the conclusion of Daniel, those who believed in faith and died before the first coming of Christ will need to wait until the fulfillment of the days allotted for the tribulation.¹⁶ They, along with those who hear the gospel and place their trust in Christ after the rapture of the church, belong to this second group of believers.¹⁷ All of these groups (the first fruits, the general harvest, and the gleanings) are part of what John describes as the “first resurrection; over these the second death has no power.”¹⁸ They include believers of all ages – Old Testament Saints, Church Age Christians and Tribulation Martyrs – their souls reunited with glorified bodies to reign with Christ for a thousand years and enjoy the presence of God forever.

The Revelator goes on to tell of the releasing of Satan for a short while at the end of the thousand year period, at which time he again deceives the nations who follow him into a final war where they are all killed by God’s divine wrath. After throwing Satan into the lake of fire to join the beast and the false prophet, God turns His attention toward the rest of the dead – those who had not been in the first resurrection (including all those He just consumed in battle, plus

¹⁵ I Thessalonians 4:16-17

¹⁶ Daniel 12:1-2; 8-13

¹⁷ Revelation 20:4

¹⁸ Revelation 20:6

those who died in all the prior ages before turning to God in faith and obedience).¹⁹ This second resurrection, referred to as the “Great White Throne Judgment” because of the description given, is the fulfillment of the Scripture that teaches that eventually “EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.”²⁰ In this judgment, all those who died in unbelief are weighed according to their deeds and found wanting.²¹ Because their names are not written in the book of life, they are cast out of the presence of God and into the lake of fire for eternal punishment.²²

While there is no escaping or avoiding the inevitability of a bodily resurrection, Scripture gives the believer every reason to look forward to the future with hope and anxious anticipation. While we know that to be absent from the body is to be at home with the Lord, we long – even groan – for the time when we will shed our earthly tent and be clothed, “in order that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.”²³ In addition, the reality of the physical resurrection of our bodies gives cause for us to have great courage and consider anew the exhortation of Paul:

“Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men, but we are made manifest to God; and I hope that we are made manifest also in your consciences.”²⁴

¹⁹ Revelation 20:7-10

²⁰ Philippians 2:10-11

²¹ Revelation 20:11-12

²² Revelation 20:15 ; cf Matthew 25:46

²³ II Corinthians 5:4

²⁴ II Corinthians 5:9-11

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