

Death, where is your sting?

1 Corinthians 15:35-58

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In 1974 a few local farmers came across an unbelievable archaeological find in Lintong District, Xi'an, Shaanxi province, China. They found the burial grounds of Qin Shi Huang, the first Emperor of China. The emperor believed that whatever was placed in his burial grounds or tomb would pass with him into the next life. With that thought in mind he had a Terracotta Army created. The warriors were life size. The unbelievable part is not just the detailed artwork of each warrior, but the fact that there were over 8,000 of them. Over 8,000 full size statue warriors in his tomb. Plus, full size horses, 130 chariots with 520 horses and 150 cavalry horses. Other terracotta non-military figures were found in other pits, including officials, acrobats, strongmen and musicians.

We can appreciate the artwork and intense labor that must have gone into this Terracotta Army, but we don't agree with Qin Shi Huang's beliefs of what happens after death. Many have sought to cheat death. Some took elixirs that promised to give immortality but resulted in their deaths. Others pursued the fountain of youth. Some today are trying to bring an end to death altogether.

If you look online, there are those who believe that we will achieve immortality by 2029, when nano-bots are invented that can move throughout our bodies fighting diseases. Others are seeking genetic engineering that will prevent the ageing of cells. Others are wanting to create human organs with 3D printers loaded with living cells. Still others are pursuing immortality by working on plans that will allow one to supposedly upload their consciousness into the cloud, so that even after one's physical body ceases to function they can continue to live through android bodies.

Mankind has always feared death and wondered what comes next. The Corinthians were struggling with these same questions. They were surrounded by a pagan culture that had plenty of its own ideas about immortality and the afterlife. These past godless beliefs were now affecting their view of Jesus and resurrection.

Some in the Corinthian church were questioning if Jesus had really risen from the dead, because in the natural world it is impossible for people to rise from the dead. Others were questioning if Jesus really had

come back to life in bodily form, or if it was just His spirit. To them it made more sense if it was just His spirit. In their Greek culture most believed that the spirit was good, but the body was evil. The Greeks believed that when one died the good spirit was finally freed from the evil body. In their thinking, if Jesus was the holy Son of God, then, surely, he did not come back in a body to be enslaved by evil once again. Others did not question that Jesus's bodily resurrection, because anything was possible for Him because He was God's Son, but they could not believe that this same resurrection was available to them, because they were mere humans. Finally, others were asking that if this resurrection is really going to happen to us as well, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?"

Because of all of this confusion about resurrection, Paul wrote this 15th chapter of 1 Corinthians. In the first 11 verses, Paul discussed the resurrection of Christ. From verses 12 to 34, Paul wrote about the resurrection of the dead. Now, in verses 35 to 58, Paul writes about the resurrection body:

³⁵ But someone will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" ³⁶ 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. ³⁸ 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.

The question was being asked about what kind of resurrection body we will have, as if our resurrection body will be the same type of body as our earthly body. Paul responded by using an example from nature. The bare kernel of wheat must die before it can give birth to new life. As long as the kernel is attached to the head of the stalk, it remains just that, a kernel, alive alongside the other kernels, but bearing no fruit. It is only when the kernel is disconnected from the stalk, and it dies, that it can be buried in the ground and produce another plant that produces many more kernels of wheat.

Even then, after the kernel has been planted in the ground, we should not expect what grows out of the ground to still look like a kernel of wheat. The kernel's new form will be very different from the kernel. There will be a stalk, and leaves, and the head that will have many more kernels of wheat. The kernel that died and the stalk which grew out of it will be very different in appearance and function, but both are still forms of wheat. This will be true of our resurrection bodies as well. Our glorified bodies will be different than our earthly bodies, but our personhood, who we are, will still be preserved in both.

The earthly body must die. This physical death will then result in us receiving a glorified body. That is the form that God has chosen for all believers who will live in eternity with Him. Our glorified body will be different than was our earthly body. Paul then reminds us how God has given distinct, different types of bodies for humans, another for animals, another for birds and another for fish.

Paul then turns our attention to the skies and to space, where God has given one glory for the sun, another for the moon and yet another for the stars. Paul is continuing his thought of God as the Creator and Lord

of creation who has chosen the form or body of everything which He created. This includes the glorified body of resurrection.

It is interesting here that Paul chose the word “glory” when referring to the sun, moon and stars. It reminds us of his writing in Romans 1:19-20, where Paul writes, *“What can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made.”* It is through creation that we receive our first understanding of the Creator.

He is our Creator God who has designed and created the sun and the moon and the stars. Psalm 147:4 declares that *“He determines the number of the stars; He calls them each by name.”* Experts now say that when you begin to figure in all of the galaxies and the observable universe, there are about 1,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 (1 billion trillion) stars! To gain some perspective on a number that big, let’s think about sand. 1 billion, trillion grains of sand would form a ball of sand that would be 72 kilometers across. That is a ball of sand that would almost reach from our church to Toledo. Imagine how many grains of sand would be in a ball that big. That is how many known stars there are, and that does not even include the stars that we know nothing about.

Now read Psalm 147:4, again. *“He (our Creator God) determines the number of the stars; He calls them each by name.”* Everything that exists is under the dominion of God. He is always loving, always good, and always right. He alone has authority and the power to do whatever He decides.

Paul is applying the majesty and sovereignty of God to this question about resurrection. Some of the Corinthians had believed in Christ but were still bringing in the beliefs of the pagan culture into the church. They might not have even realized it. It may be much like us at times. We bring in the world’s opinion of sexuality, family, success and other topics without first looking to scriptures so that we can understand truth from God, who knows all things and has authority over all things.

God’s sovereignty applies to our resurrection bodies as well. What will happen when this life ends is not up for debate, as if our opinion will somehow change the outcome. If we want to know what resurrection will be like, we will not find our answers by sitting around a table at a sidewalk café talking with others about what they think is going to happen after we die. God has not left us in the dark about these issues. His scripture has given us explanations on this subject.

As we read in Philippians 3:20-21, *“But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.”* Like the kernel of wheat that has died and now has grown into another form of wheat, so our earthly bodies will die and come back in a different form. Philippians 3:21 declares that our new bodies will be like His glorious body.

While we do not know for sure what that will look like, we can see glimpses in scripture. In Luke 24:39, we see that Jesus has a resurrected body. He instructed His disciples, *“Touch me and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.”* A few verses later Jesus even asked the disciples if they had something to eat. Verse 42 then says that, *“They gave Him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and*

ate before them.” In John 20:26, when Jesus appeared to the disciples again, it says that, *“Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them.”* From these verses we see that the glorified body will be flesh and blood. We will be able to eat. Somehow it will not be bound by the same laws of nature that govern our lives now.”

In Matthew 17 and Luke 9, we see the story on the Mount of Transfiguration. There we see Jesus transfigured before Peter, James and John. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. In that moment, Moses, who had been dead over 1,000 years, and Elijah, who had been dead for around 900 years, appeared with Jesus. Luke 9:31 says that they *“appeared in glory.”* In that we see that in our glorified bodies we will still possess our personhood and will be recognizable in some manner. Though our glorified bodies will have some similarities, the differences will be drastic.

In Revelation 21:4 we read that, *“He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”* Our bodies and our eternal lives in heaven will be glorious.

Paul describes this glorified body in 1 Corinthians 15:42-49:

⁴²So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. ⁴³It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. ⁴⁴It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.

The contrast is startling between the body that we are laying down and the body in which we are gaining. How blessed are we in Christ! No more sickness, decay, deterioration, pain, mourning or death. Paul continues. . .

⁴⁵Thus it is written, “The first man Adam became a living being”; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. ⁴⁶But it is not the spiritual that is first but the natural, and then the spiritual. ⁴⁷The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. ⁴⁸As 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. ⁴⁹Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.

The first man, Adam, was a natural man, from earth, enslaved to sin and spiritually dead (Ephesians 2:1-5). We bear the image of the first Adam of earth. That is who we were before we met Christ. But then came Christ, the second Adam. A man of the Spirit, from heaven, free of sin and spiritually alive. It is in Christ that we have been given the opportunity to be born again. To be made new. To die to the natural man of sin and be reborn as a spiritual man of righteousness. As in the words of Jesus in John 3, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of heaven. . . Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”*

For those who are in Christ they have now been made spiritually alive, bearing the image of Christ, the spiritual man of heaven. Their truly identity is no longer tied to the flesh, but is now eternally tied to the spirit. Because of this, when this human body dies, we will each be raised up with glorified bodies in the Spirit. It is in the Spirit that our eternal life has already begun.

Paul continues:

⁵⁰ I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. ⁵¹ Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, ⁵² 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 shall be changed. ⁵³ For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. ⁵⁴ When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

“Death is swallowed up in victory.” ⁵⁵ “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?”

⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁵⁸ Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

A natural man, trusting in the accolades of the flesh, will never inherit the kingdom of heaven. This body must die and be left behind. It is only the imperishable life of the spirit that is prepared to enter the next life. Before we enter the kingdom of heaven we must be changed. Some will die and some will still remain until Christ's return, but either way a transition will be required from natural man to spiritual man, from the perishable to the imperishable, from the body of old to the body of glory before one enters heaven. Only then will the mortal put on immortality. Only then shall death be laid down and the eternal victory be accomplished.

The fear of death is the fear of judgment, and the fear of judgment comes from the fear of sin. *“But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory (over death) through our Lord Jesus.”*

God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). Because of this, *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”* (1 John 1:9).

Last night a woman from our church died. We stood with family and friends. The doctors had done their best, but there was nothing more they could do. There was now no brain activity and the decision was made to disconnect her from all life support. And so, the small group of family and friends waited. Some prayed. Some sang. Some sat in silence watching each breath, wondering if it would be her last. Finally, the moment came when the woman passed from death to life, from the perishable to the imperishable. She left behind the mortal and took on immortality.

Think on these things. That we no longer are slaves to sin in our fleshly bodies, but we have been made new and given the Holy Spirit as a guarantee. When we die, this body will reach the end and we will be met with a new glorified body, which will usher us into eternity and into the presence of God. There *“He will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things will have passed away”* (Revelation 21:4).

Because of this, *“my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”*

Discussion questions:

1. Why do you think death makes people feel so uncomfortable?
2. What different ideas do you think people have about what happens when a person dies?
3. In your own words, explain a kernel of wheat dying so it can be changed. How does Paul use this to explain resurrection?
4. Philippians 3:20-21 says, *“The Lord Jesus Christ will transform our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body.”* What different examples does scripture give us to help us see what this glorified body will be like?
5. How would you explain the difference between being in the first Adam and the last Adam from verses 45-49?
6. How does salvation in Christ remove the sting of death?
7. What do you think God wants you to remember from this lesson?
8. What do you think God wants you to do in response to this lesson?