

What is Sown and What is Raised

1 Corinthians 15:35-49

Good morning! This morning we'll be continuing our series through the book of 1 Corinthians with chapter 15, verses 35-49.

Last week, Pastor Grant did a fantastic job of walking us through the first 34 verses of this chapter, stressing, as Paul does, the central and essential importance of belief in the resurrection for the Christian faith. This week we will continue to examine Paul's defense of that belief. And to get our minds headed in the direction he's going with his argument, I want to begin by asking you to remember your early imaginings of what heaven would be like? I'm guessing I'm not the only one who fantasized about what heaven would be like as a child. I took particular interest in what I would be able to do physically. Here are a few of my fantasies that I can recall.

First, growing up, I spent a fair amount of time riding my bike with friends. Of course, this also meant I had my share of crashes. So, one of my dreams for heaven was that I could ride my bike as fast as I could possibly go, fall off, and not get hurt. I imagined the streets of gold would be somewhere between the consistency of rubber and Jello, making them a positive delight to crash on. I also had my hopes (and still do, if I'm honest) that I would be able to fly once in heaven. How cool would it be to rocket into the air like Superman? Again, I'm guessing I'm not alone in my hopes that we'll get to do that. A third fantasy was that I would be able to eat sweets endlessly without getting full or sick. Cheesecake for millennia. That was the dream. I also hoped I'd get to have a pet lion in heaven, though that doesn't have much to do with our focus this morning.

As silly as these examples may be, I think it's good to imagine what the experience eternity will be. Of course, as Grant pointed out, we don't ultimately end up in heaven; we end up in the new Jerusalem on the new earth with the new heaven. But the point remains: it's a good practice to imagine what that

life will be like, and what our new, glorified bodies will allow us to do. Because it gives us hope by reminding us that death is not the end for those in Christ, resurrection and glory are the end, and so we can bear this life with peace, hope, and joy.

Few, if any Christians of the past have ever imagined such things better than C.S. Lewis. In his fantastical book *The Great Divorce*, he imagines heaven (though we could easily call it the new earth) as a far more substantial place than the old earth and hell. He imagined heaven as “made of some different substance, so much solidier than things in our country that men were ghosts by comparison”. The natural men of his story are therefore unable to pick a flower, lift a leaf, or even walk on the grass without sustaining injury, for even those things were more substantial than they. The heavenly people of his story, on the other hand, shake the earth as they move across it, their feet sinking deep into, what is for them, springy turf. In this way, Lewis expresses the idea that the spiritual is, in fact, more substantial than the physical, though we often think the other way round. But Paul seems to agree with Lewis when it comes to our resurrected state, as we will see in our passage this morning.

First, I'd like to do an overview of 1 Corinthians 15, to remind ourselves of what Grant taught last week, and make sure we understand the context of what Paul is doing here in general. It's essential to understand that chapter 15 is a defense of belief in resurrection, and Paul is trotting out a number of different arguments for this belief, starting with the most objective and compelling evidence and moving to more subjective evidence.

Thus, he begins in verses 1-11 with the Gospel as it was preached in the early church. In verse 3 he uses the formula “I delivered to you...what I also received...” This is important, because that language typically means what comes next is a creedal affirmation of the church. In other words, this is the officially accepted summary of the Gospel. And what does that summary include? A strong emphasis on the resurrection. According to Paul, there were over 500 eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrection.

It's important that we recognize just how compelling this evidence is. When Paul wrote this, you could go and talk to these people. In other words, you could factcheck Paul's claim here, and yet there's no record of it being debunked. This is incredibly compelling witness testimony, especially considering the fact that some of those witnesses died for their belief in that event, refusing to recant.

After this evidential and creedal defense of Jesus' resurrection, Paul moves to a logical defense in verses 12-28, based on what he's just said. If resurrection is impossible, then Jesus could not have been raised, and yet, as Paul has just said, there is overwhelming testimony that He did. Very logically then, if Jesus was raised from the dead, it is at least a possibility for others to be raised as well.

From there, in verses 29-34 Paul points out a number of different practices that would make no sense if resurrection wasn't possible. The washing of dead bodies in preparation for burial. The risks he and his partners in ministry face in this life. Now, in our passage he will respond to a possible objection, before moving on in verses 50-58 to explain the resurrection's place in the plan of God and our full entrance into His kingdom. Hopefully that gives you an idea of the basic logical flow of the passage. With that, let's look at the objection and Paul's response, beginning with verses 35-36.

"But someone will ask, 'How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?' You foolish person! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies."

Here we have the basic objection and the basic response. It seems the basic objection has to do with how people are supposed to be raised, once their bodies have decomposed. Such an objector may have been thinking, "Ok, I'll concede that Jesus was raised, but he was only dead three days, so there was still a body *to be* raised. Not so with many others. How are they supposed to come back?" You can see the seeming logic of the objection, however, based on Paul's response it seems like this question was not made entirely in

good faith. Rather, it seems to be a sort of appeal to the ridiculousness of the logistics of resurrection. And so, Paul's basic response is, "Really? Have you ever considered the universal reality that what is sown doesn't truly live unless it first dies in the ground?"

This rhetorical exchange is reminiscent of Jesus' exchange with the Sadducees in Matthew 22, which, interestingly enough, was another debate concerning resurrection. There, the Sadducees, who didn't believe in resurrection, posed a hypothetical scenario in which a woman is married to 7 different men in life, due to their early deaths and Jewish customs, and then they asked Jesus, "In the resurrection, whose wife will she be?" Jesus' responds bluntly, "You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God." He then goes on to explain that there won't be marriage in the sense that we understand it in the resurrected life. And so, the question of the Sadducees only revealed their lack of understanding.

With both Jesus and Paul, their opponents are trying to appeal to the ridiculousness of the logistics of resurrection, as a way of making it seem implausible. But ultimately, these objections only reveal the ignorance of the objectors. Paul goes on to elaborate on his basic response in verses 37-41.

"And what you sow is not the body that is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. For not all flesh is the same, but there is one kind for humans, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. 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. 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."

Paul is bringing up and appealing to a universal reality: God made seeds, and He brings from them various bodies as He has assigned. To grow an oak, you don't bury an oak tree, you bury an acorn. And only as that acorn

disintegrates do you get an oak tree. And so it is with virtually every living thing, and even in some way non-living things.

Everything has an embryonic stage of some kind, and what is born is rarely what you would expect based on the appearance of that embryo. Humans, animals, birds, and fish all begin as eggs of some kind. Even stars begin as simple dust and gas. And who could ever imagine what would come from those humble beginnings?

Paul is saying that the resurrection is not a return to being an embryo, so why would we need our embryonic bodies? Our current bodies are seeds or kernels and so we actually need those bodies to die and dissipate, so that our true and greater bodies can emerge. Paul goes on to say this explicitly in verse 42, and then contrasts some of the general differences between our current bodies and our future resurrected ones.

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

There is much we do not know concerning what our resurrected bodies will be like. Alas, we do not know if we will be able to fly or eat cheesecake endlessly. However, we do know a few things about them, at least in general, and Paul outlines a few of those characteristics here.

The bodies we now have are perishable but will give way to imperishable bodies. We know all too well that our bodies now are perishable. They are subject to injury, age, and death. For most of us, our bodies are in decay for the majority of our lives. Our resurrected bodies will be indestructible, ageless, and undying.

The bodies we now have are full of dishonor but will give way to bodies full of glory. Our current bodies are full of shameful impulses and appetites, requiring us to either struggle against those things every day of our earthly lives

or else be overcome by them. Our resurrected bodies will only have impulses and appetites for what is good and noble and lovely, with no predisposition toward what is shameful whatsoever.

The bodies we now have are weak but will give way to bodies of power. Our current bodies tire and become infirmed all too easily. Our resurrected bodies will never tire or sicken but will be endowed with what we would now call miraculous strength and vitality.

In short, the bodies we now have are natural bodies but will give way to spiritual bodies. And this is where, I think, Lewis's imaginings are a helpful corrective. When you hear "natural" and "spiritual", don't think "physical" and "ghostly". It is the natural body that is ghostly in comparison to the more substantial spiritual body that will come.

In fact, the Greek word translated "natural" here, finds its roots in the word for "breath", so arguably a better translation would be "breath-like body". So, natural in this case refers to that which belongs to the nature of this world, which we know is passing away. Human life in particular is spoken of as a breath in such places as Psalm 78:33, "So he made their days vanish like a breath, and their years in terror." Our lives, which, of course, include our bodies, are not very substantial. They are a breath.

The word translated "spiritual" also calls to mind breath, but not the fleeting breath that is the life of man, but the eternal breath, or Spirit of God which is the source of all life. It's the same word that Paul uses early in 1 Corinthians to refer to "spiritual" gifts, which are given by God's Spirit and are even manifestations of the Spirit. So, our current bodies are made of the stuff of this earth. But our resurrected bodies will apparently be made of the very substance that created the universe and animated our natural bodies in the beginning. It is this reality to which Paul turns next in verses 45-48.

"Thus it is written, 'The first man Adam became a living being'; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first but the

natural, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As 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.”

Paul now compares Adam and Jesus, and in so doing begins to touch on one of the deep mysteries of God’s eternal plan. Last week Pastor Grant claimed he was dealing with the last sticky text in 1 Corinthians. Well, surprise! We’ve stumbled into another one here. Please be gracious with me, as I do my best to convey what the text is saying.

Paul says Adam was a living being. Meaning, I think, that he had life within himself. Yet, he was ultimately a man of dust who would eventually die when that life ran out. Jesus, however, is more than a living being, He is a life-giving being.

Put another way: Adam was a puddle of life; Jesus is a spring of life, so to speak. Do you get the difference? A puddle holds a limited amount of water that either dries up or is absorbed by the ground. A spring cannot be dried up or absorbed, because it does not just hold water, it produces it.

In fact, Jesus said of himself in John 7:38, “Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, “Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.” Jesus is portraying Himself as an infinite source of life that makes others into sources of life in their turn when they connect themselves to His life-giving flow. Like a vast river supplying many tributaries, or like the ocean that feeds the rivers of the world. Jesus is the ocean of life. To repurpose a phrase of Jonathan Edwards, He is “an ocean without shores or bottom” who supplies endless life to all who are connected to Him.

And how does this happen? By His Spirit, as John makes clear in the very next verse of John 7, “Now this he said about the Spirit...” Then in Ephesians 1:14 Paul would later call the Holy Spirit “the guarantee of our inheritance”. In other words, the Spirit as we have Him now is an advance on greater things to

come. Applying that to what we're thinking about this morning, it may mean that for those in Christ, on the day we are made one with God, as John 17 and Ephesians 1 say we will be, we will not just *have* the Spirit inside of us, our bodies will be composed of His very substance.

Now, a quick disclaimer and an observation. First, I am not saying we become God (that's a really important disclaimer), but I am saying we become one with God. That may seem a mighty fine line to draw, but I would argue it is the one the Bible draws. But again, we're dealing with a mystery here, so we must accept that there is much we will not know about the details this side of the resurrection. Second, and this is the observation, Paul is clearly not talking about bodies as we currently understand them, nor for that matter is he talking about spirits in the way we typically understand them either. Whatever the specifics, we will no longer have bodies of dust; we will literally have spiritual bodies. And in this way, we will finally and fully fulfill the original intent of all mankind to bear the image God, as Paul concludes this section saying in verse 49.

"Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven."

In Genesis 1, God created man in His own image. Unfortunately, when Adam sinned that image was twisted and distorted. And we have all come from Adam, we have all borne his image, and therefore, have also only reflected a distorted image of God. With the coming of Jesus and the justification and sanctification made possible by His work on our behalf, our ability to bear God's image began to be restored. One day, that restoration will be complete. One day, sanctification, that process of becoming more and more like Jesus, will give way to glorification, when we are actually like Jesus, and we will bear the image of God in the fullest sense possible.

The resurrection will be the ultimate fulfillment of mankind's identity as the image bearers of God. No longer will that image be obscured by fragile dust. Then we will bear the image of the heavenly Man in glory. It is to this end

that our earthly bodies are sown in the ground, that they may give way to indestructible, incorruptible, immortal, spiritual bodies that truly bear our Lord and God's image.

So, here is our main idea: **Our earthly, natural bodies are the bare seeds of our glorified, spiritual bodies, sown in the soil of this life as a preparation for resurrection life.** This is Paul's contention in response to his objectors. Hence, we must die here to live there.

Paul says it this way in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, "So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal." We do not lose heart. Why? Because this is not the end, it is the seed of the beginning.

As Grant pointed out to us last week, the resurrection is an essential doctrine of the Christian faith, because it gives us the hope we need to follow Jesus. Jesus said we would need to lose our lives to find them, and the only way we can follow that call is if we believe that this life is not the end. We can have peace in the trouble of this life, because this life is not the end. We can rejoice in persecution, because this life is not the end. We can give ourselves away like Christ in gracious, self-sacrificing love, because this life is not the end. We do not lose heart, because this life is not the end. The end is living in the kingdom with God our Father and the Lord Jesus. But guess what? We need a new body for that kingdom.

Not to give away where Grant is taking us next week, but in the very next verse of chapter 15 Paul says, *"I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable."* We need new bodies for where we're going. Perhaps, an illustration would help us understand this.

Consider the experience of an unborn child. We start out as a single cell, and then spend just under 10 months developing into something else, namely, something that is capable of surviving in the world outside the womb. Initially, we can't breathe on our own. We can't eat or drink. We can't see, hear, smell, taste, or feel. We don't even have the organs necessary to perform those basic functions. We are a shadow of a full-bodied human being.

And consider the shift in experience from the womb to the outside world. There's a reason babies cry as soon as they're born, right? They have just entered an overwhelmingly different reality. It's colder, louder, brighter, and more solid than they could have possibly conceived of while in the womb, even if they had the capacity for such understanding, which, of course, they don't. The world is an unimaginable place for a baby in the womb. It may get vague indications that there is an outside world: pressure from a hand on its mother's belly, the muffled mumbling of its father's voice, etc. But none of those womb experiences could possibly convey the reality to which that baby is bound. Such is our case in this life.

This life is our womb, and the sanctification it includes is our spiritual-fetal development. The suffering and trials we endure are not inconveniences, they are preparations. They are preparing us for a reality that requires Christlike love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control, like our current reality requires the ability to breathe oxygen. They are preparing us for a reality that requires us to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love our neighbor as ourselves, like our current reality requires us to eat and drink. The trials we experience are necessary for the growth of our spiritual bodies.

And the last of those trials is death, when the final bit of our natural body, the seed, disintegrates, and the first shoot of our spiritual body pierces through the soil of eternity. Just imagine what that day will be like.

Discussion Questions

“What is Sown and What is Raised”

1 Corinthians 15:35-49

Main Idea: Our earthly, natural bodies are the bare seeds of our glorified, spiritual bodies, sown in the soil of this life as a preparation for resurrection life.

1. Consider the impact of the perishability (injury, aging, death, etc.) of our bodies on your life. Now, spend some time imagining a world with imperishable bodies.
2. Consider the impact of our bodies' bent towards what is shameful (sin, vanity, etc.) on your life. Now, spend some time imagining a world with bodies only inclined to the glorious.
3. Consider the impact of the weakness (tiredness, sickness, etc.) on your life. Now, spend some time imagining a world with bodies of power.