

## Exegesis 1 Corinthians 15:35-44

### Outline

1 Corinthians 15:35-44 argues against doubting the resurrection of the dead on the basis that we don't know what their bodies will be like or how it can be done especially when we know there are all different kinds of bodies. He is asking if the dead can be raised by God and if they do, what kind of body they will have. He is clear that there is a radical difference between our bodies as they are now and what they will be when they rise again.

### Overview

It starts off with quoting the doubters who are questioning the resurrection just because they don't know what kind of bodies the raised will have [1].

Its reply is that what is sown has to die before it can rise [2]. He says we see God giving it the body he has planned [3]. The next argument is how animals and people have different kinds of flesh [4]. It then considers how the heavenly bodies (eg stars and the moon) are different and even differ from each other [5]. It reasons that the resurrection of the dead is proven to be possible [6]. Then we read that the dead body perishes but the risen body is imperishable and is glorious and powerful [7]. It calls it a spiritual body [8]. The summary sentence simply concludes "If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body" [9].

### Context - The author and why he is writing

Paul, who claimed he taught with authority given to him by Jesus, wrote the passage as part of a letter. He considered the doctrine of resurrection to be essential to faith in Jesus and is writing in its defence. Paul had pastoral authority over the Corinthian Church which he helped to establish. He had a close friendship with the Corinth Church. They evidently look to him as their authority more than their own pastors because he answers questions for them for which they are craving answers.

The letter is philosophical and largely logical in that it outlines various premises that point to a (though not necessarily valid or correct) conclusion. It reminds doubters of what they already know to help them see that they had the answers already.

### Readership

The passage starts with, "Someone will ask, 'How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?'" [10]. Church members were saying they believed in the gospel and were asking such questions which proved that they were not the believers they said they were.

Paul states that the question is itself foolish for we see all kinds of bodies around us including the body of the seed that becomes utterly transformed when it grows.

Is Paul being severe? No. Matthew Henry tells us what Paul is implying, "It is foolish to question the Almighty power of God to raise the dead, when we see it every day quickening and reviving things that are dead" [11].

Does the resurrection of the dead really matter that much? Yes for earlier Paul said that if there is no resurrection then Jesus did not rise and our faith is useless and we are deluded [12]. If Jesus did not rise, our loved ones will not rise either. His seeming severity must be seen in that context.

But the fact remains, seeing different kinds of bodies around us does not indicate that Jesus's alleged transformed body is a possibility. As we will see, he speaks of the body almost as a ghost!

### The seed

Paul reminds the readers that there are many different kinds of bodies.

He points out that a seed is a kind of body and it's put in the ground to die and it rises as a new kind of body. [13]

A commentator wrote “since most of us are buried in the ground after we die ... Paul likens the process of the resurrection to the planting of a seed” [14]. The analogy does not leave any room for thinking that the risen body is a brand new body. It is not. It is the former body utterly transformed.

We know that the seed does not die. Paul says it does. The word for die is *apothnesko* which is used in Romans 5:15. There we read that all die because of the sin of the first man. Death is linked to sin. The implication is that death shows we are sinners and resurrection shows we have been saved from sin.

Different kind of bodies

Paul speaks of how people and animals and birds have different kinds of bodies in the hope that we should not find the notion of our body being different in the resurrection to be necessarily a strange one [15].

The list he makes starts off with people, then its animals, then birds and then fish. The bodies are listed in order of difference. He lists them all from the greatest to the least to drive the point home. The point is that as all kinds of bodies despite their differences are still bodies, therefore the bodies we get in the resurrection though its very different from our bodies as they are now is still the same body. “It is the same body that is interred in the earth, and falls asleep by death, that will be quickened” [16].

Again, the different kinds of bodies on earth do not show that Jesus may now have a heavenly and spiritual and supernatural body.

Perishable and imperishable

Paul says that as one body differs from another so it will be with the resurrection body. He develops this by stating, “The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable”[17]. His logic is that just as you have different kinds of bodies so you can have perishable bodies and imperishable. This tells us that it is possible for God to raise up people from the dead so that they are not subject to death anymore.

Paul has argued that as the seed can become something very different so the body can perish and be raised to imperishable life.

Paul didn't explicitly say that because we see the heavenly bodies and they seem to never die that resurrected beings will never die either. But perhaps this was at the back of his mind - why stress the heavenly bodies and go into the detail he did?

The earthly and heavenly body

Paul then speaks of the heavenly bodies sun, moon and stars having different kinds of splendour that differs from the splendour of earthly bodies. He notes that one “star differs from star in glory [18].”

He reasons that the differences in glory show that there is no reason to think that the low degree of splendour we possess now as earthly beings proves we cannot have better than this.

He concludes that the resurrection body is like the body that arises from a seed - its the same body but different in many respects. He says our bodies will be raised indestructible and full of heavenly splendour.

“The bodies of the dead, though all immortal , shall possess different degrees of splendour and glory, according to the state of holiness in which their respective souls were found” [19] says a commentary.

I disagree with that commentary. Paul doesn't say if he thinks these differences are bad things. The sun could be equal in splendour to the moon though both have a different kind of splendour. It is a mistake to use this text as showing that we will have unequal splendour in the resurrection. Different splendour does not mean unequal splendour.

Another commentary claims that Paul's words “The body ...is sown in dishonour” answers to “our vile body” (Philippians 3:21); literally, ‘our body of humiliation’” [20]

I think that this is merely observing that the dead body is repulsive and does not intend to demean the body.

Paul wrote, “It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body” [21]

A spirit is that which has no material or physical components but which is nonetheless real. The spiritual body is not a mere spirit. He calls it a body. A body is physical. He is using spiritual body to describe a real physical body that has the characteristics - but not nature - of spirit.

He doesn't say exactly what he means by a spiritual body. The context talks about the resurrection body in terms of glory

and being imperishable. This helps us to see that like spirits, the resurrection bodies will not perish and be capable of receiving everlasting glory. They are safe from material threats and ageing and disease.

Paul contrasts the physical body and the spiritual body - and though he contrasts, the spiritual body is really the transformed physical body.

### Significance for Christians

Paul writes that our bodies are given to us by God but God has a wonderful purpose for them. Paul speaks of the reality of our bodily existence now. Our bodies are subject to death and God honours them by treating them as the seed of the new immortal and glorious resurrection body. He does not exaggerate our imperfection. He avoids any suggestion that the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead denigrates us as we are now. Believers say that the perception that Christianity is anti-flesh is common today and it is helpful to learn from Paul's healthy attitude towards the flesh.

The passage comforts those who have doubts for it alerts them to the fact that they need not have them and empowers them and us to simply enjoy knowing that we can and will rise again to enjoy everlasting glory. This is of particular value for those who have lost loved ones in death.

The message of the resurrection is the promise that we can enjoy God body and soul for ever.

The text, in the Christian view, shows that it is reasonable to have this hope.

But it doesn't! The argument that different bodies on earth and in the sky show that Jesus might have a magic body now does not follow.

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[1] 1 Cor 15: 35

[2] 1 Cor 15:37

[3] 1 Cor 15:38

[4] 1 Cor 15:39

[5] 1 Cor 15:40, 41

[6] 1 Cor 15:42

[7] 1 Cor 15:42, 43

[8] 1 Cor 15:44

[9] 1 Cor 15:44

[10] 1 Cor 15:35, RSV Catholic Edition

[11] Henry, M. and Hayford, J. W., *Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Nelson, 1997) p.999

[12] 1 Cor 15:17-19

[13] 1 Cor 15:37

[14] <http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/an-analysis-of-i-corinthians-15-frederick-meekins-sermon-on-apologetics-general-146408.asp?page=5>

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[16] Gill, J., *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity, or, A System of Evangelical Truths Deduced from the Sacred Scriptures, Volume 2*, (Thomas Tegg, 1839) p 223

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