

1 COR 15.42-48: WE SHALL ALL BE CHANGED!

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Down through the centuries Christians have asked themselves the question: ‘What happens when our loved ones die? What is life now like for them?’

Some of the questions Christians have asked have actually been very specific: e.g.:

How will they look?

- If heaven be paradise restored, then will they be like Adam & Eve, naked & without shame? .
- Or will they be wearing the finest of clothes, as befits their new status as citizens of heaven?

How old will they appear?

- If someone dies in their 90s, will they appear in the streets of the New Jerusalem as an old person, somewhat bent and stiff with age?
- And if someone dies at the age of 10, will they appear as a child?

This issue has caused the spilling of much theological ink.

By the end of 13th century theologians reached a consensus: as each person reaches their peak of perfection around the age of 30, they will be resurrected as they would have appeared at that time – even if they never lived to reach that age.

The fact is that when it comes to life after death there are many questions to which we do not know the answer.

In the words of the prophet Isaiah, quoted by the Apostle Paul in 1 Cor 2.9: “**What no one ever saw or heard, what no one ever thought could happen, is the very thing God prepared for those who love him**”.

Heaven is beyond our imagining – and far more glorious than we could ever dream of. We limit God, the moment we begin to try to depict the new world that is coming.

Not surprisingly therefore here in 1 Cor 15.51 the Apostle Paul speaks about the future as a ‘**mystery**’ – as a ‘**secret truth**’ (GNB). There is so much that we do not know, and where we have to be content to be ‘agnostic’.

And yet, in spite of much that is unknown, there are a number of things we can know.

In particular we can know the following 4 things:

1. Resurrection means certainty
2. Resurrection means creativity
3. Resurrection means continuity
4. Resurrection means community

1. RESURRECTION MEANS CERTAINTY

As Christians we know that death is not the end. For us, death is but the gateway into a new

and fuller life. In the words of the Apostle Paul: “**Christ has been raised from death as the guarantee that those who sleep in death will also be raised**” (v20).

Yes, we can be certain because of Jesus and his resurrection
Jesus has defeated the powers of sin and death – and we too may share in that victory.
As Jesus himself once said: “**Because I live, you also will live**” (John 14.19)

As a result of the death & resurrection of Jesus, death’s landscape has totally changed. Just as in the lowlands of Holland, once a hole has been made in the sea defences and the dyke has been breached, the sea rushes in and disaster strikes the people around, so when Christ was raised from death, a hole was blown through death’s defences and life now floods all around.

The hope of life after death is not based on wishful thinking – it is based on the incontrovertible fact of the resurrection of Jesus. It is therefore *a certain hope*. So every time we ministers commit a body to be buried or cremated, we say: “*We now commit the body of our friend.....confident of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ*”.

Do notice the emphasis on the resurrection of Jesus.
It is the resurrection of Jesus which makes all the difference.
It is the resurrection which means certainty.
Christians don’t believe in the immortality of the soul, they believe in the resurrection of the body. In the words of one theologian: “*Belief in the immortality of the soul is not belief in a revolutionary event. Immortality, in fact, is only a negative assertion: the soul does not die, but simply lives on. Resurrection is a positive assertion: the whole man, who has really died, is recalled to life by a new act of creation by God*” (Cullmann).

If our loved ones have died believing in the Lord Jesus, we can be absolutely certain that they are now alive in Christ. As Paul writes: “**For just as all people die because of their union with Adam, in the same way all will be raised to life because of their union with Christ**” (v22). If we are united to Christ in this life, then we shall be united to him forever.

But what about loved ones who did not go to church, who apparently never put their trust in Jesus as their Saviour and their Lord?
The fact is that there is nothing inevitable about heaven. Hell is a reality.
When people consciously choose to reject God’s gift of life in Jesus, then sadly that choice will be respected.

But, as Abraham discovered, “**the judge of all the earth has to act justly**” (Gen 18.25).
The Bible makes clear that where people have never heard of Jesus, or never really understood what Jesus has done for them, or who have rejected Jesus because perhaps of the unloving or hypocritical actions of his followers, then God will judge them according to the light which they have received (Acts 17.27; Romans 2.12-16).

In the words of F.W. Faber’s great hymn:

*“There’s a wideness in God’s mercy
like the wideness of the sea;
there’s a kindness in his justice*

which is more than liberty.

*For the love of God is broader
than the measure of man's mind,
and the heart of the Eternal
is most wonderfully kind"*

Yes, we can be certain of God's love – and we can be certain too of the life that God offers us all in Jesus.

2. RESURRECTION MEANS CREATIVITY

The resurrection of the body is not the same as the 'resuscitation' of a body.

'Bodily' resurrection is not the same as 'physical' resurrection.

When on the last day God raises us from the dead, he exercise his own creativity and will give us a new body. And thank God – I wouldn't want to be saddled for ever with this old body of mine.

Whenever I take a funeral, I love to read these words of Paul: **"This is how it will be when the dead are raised to life. When the body is buried, it is mortal; when raised it will be immortal. When buried, it is ugly & weak; when raised it will be beautiful & strong. When buried, it is a physical body; when raised, it will be a spiritual body"** (vv42-44).

Strangely some of the early Christians failed to take Paul seriously when he wrote here in 1 Cor 15.50: **"What is made of flesh and blood cannot share in God's Kingdom"**.

For instance, an early church father, Tertullian, used the words of Jesus that "the very hairs of your head are all numbered" (Lk 12.7) and that "there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (e.g. Matt 13.50) to prove that both hair and teeth will be present in the resurrection. But he was wrong.

As Paul says here in 1 Cor 15, at the end of time both the living and the dead will be transformed: **"we shall all be changed"** (v51).

The fact is that the "natural" order of things will be changed into a **"spiritual"** or "supernatural" way of life (v44).

- This resurrection of the body will be a superior form of existence. The limitations of this present life, with all its indignities and weaknesses, will be left behind..
- The life to come will not be a pale imitation of this life - rather the new order of things will be more real and more vibrant. In the life to come we will not be maimed ghosts tapping out pathetic messages at the behest of mediums. We shall be more alive than ever.

Needless to say, when God creates this new body, he is able to create the new body, even when the old has totally disintegrated.

There was a stage when the RC church opposed the practice of cremation – for it was seen to be opposed to belief in the resurrection of the body. But that is a nonsense – for ultimately the body disintegrates, whether it be buried or whether it be burnt.

If God created the world 'from nothing', then he can re-create bodies too.

To an all-powerful God the fact that the body of a Christian may have been blown to bits by a

bomb in some terrorist action gives him no problem.

Indeed, this is what Paul to all intents and purposes states in v35. To the person who asks "**How can the dead be raised to life? What kind of body will they have?**", Paul declares "**You fool**" (v35).

Now a fool in the Bible is not a person who is ESN, but rather a person who fails to take God into account (see Ps 14.1; 53.1; 92.6; Lk 12.16-21).

The objection that is being raised is not a sign of ignorance, but rather a sign of a godless attitude. For as Jesus said, "**With God all things are possible**" (Matt 19.26//).

3. RESURRECTION MEANS CONTINUITY

The resurrection of the body expresses continuity.

Along with change, there will also be a continuing sense of identity.

This thought is present in Paul's analogy of the seed: "**When you sow a seed in the ground, it does not sprout to life unless it dies. And what you sow is a bare seed, perhaps a grain of wheat or some other grain, not the full-bodied plant that will later grow up**" (vv36,37).

The analogy of the seed illustrates that one living thing, through death, can have two modes of existence. Death is not the end; death simply means change.

In other words, the resurrection will involve continuity, but also discontinuity.

In the words of C.S.Lewis, "*The old field of space, time, matter, and the senses is to be weeded, dug and sown for a new crop. We may be tired of that old field: God is not*".

Furthermore, this process of change or transformation is a process which is in God's hands.

So Paul writes: "**God provides that seed with the body he wishes**" (v38).

The process of transformation doesn't just happen – it is God who is at work.

Indeed our bodies experience change already in this life.

Biochemists inform us that during a seven year cycle the molecular composition of our bodies is completely changed. In one sense there is no relationship between our bodies as children and our bodies as young people, let alone our bodies as old people.

And yet there is continuity. This continuity is expressed through personality.

At death, however, our bodies undergo far more radical change.

The "**seed**" of our earthly bodies dissolves. And yet the new life which God gives has a relationship with the old. It is a 'fruit' of the old.

In spite of all the changes, it is the same person.

In the Bible the body represents the whole person.

Whereas the Greeks would say a man or a woman "has" a body, from a Biblical perspective a man or woman "is" a body.

It is through the body that we communicate personality.

Changes to the body, however, do not effect the essential personality.

Just as a message is still the same message whether spoken in words or transmitted through electronic mail or flashed through in Morse code, so we shall be the same persons, whatever the 'material' form in which our personalities are expressed.

This means, therefore, that in answer to the question 'Shall we recognize our loved ones?',

the answer must be yes. Heaven is going to be a place of great re-union.

What a wonderful thought.

4. RESURRECTION MEANS COMMUNITY

It was the French philosopher Albert Camus who said: "*Hell is other people*". In fact, he got it wrong: "Heaven is other people".

Although we may be buried in our individual little boxes, in the life to come we shall not be living in separate pigeon holes - we shall be living life together

This sense of community is present in the teaching of Jesus where the Kingdom of God is repeatedly likened to a great banquet. There Jesus speaks of people coming from the East and the West, from the North and the South, and sitting down at the great feast in the Kingdom of God (Lk 13.29).

Heaven is about other people – it's about togetherness – one might add, all the more reason to learn to get on with people in this life.

But this idea of community is also implied by Paul's teaching concerning the resurrection of the body. For the body is a way in which we communicate with others.

It is because we have bodies that we are able to talk to one another – to smile at one another – to stroke and kiss one another.

Gosh, could you imagine loving another person outside the body – that would be a nonsense. We communicate to others through our bodies.

If life in the world to come were to be just a solitary existence, then maybe a 'soul' would have been sufficient. But life in the world to come is life together – and so it must involve the resurrection of the body.

True, it will be a new way of living together. There will, for instance, be no exclusive relationships such as we find in marriage (see Lk 20.27-38), but relationships there will be. So as Paul wrote to Christians at Thessalonica who were worrying about their loved ones: We shall all be "**together... with the Lord forever**" (1 Thess 5.17)

Heaven without relationships would indeed be a poor thing.

In conclusion, the resurrection of the body is a wonderful hope and is something to be looked forward to. There is no reason for us to be worried for our loved ones.

Something of the spirit of the resurrection is expressed by this epitaph on an old tombstone: "*The body of B.Franklin, printer, like the cover of an old book, its contents turned out and stripped of its lettering and gilding lies here, food for worms. But the work shall not be lost; for it will, as he believed, appear once more in a new and more elegant edition corrected and improved by the Author*".

No wonder as Paul draws toward the end of his treatise on the resurrection he declares:

"Where, Death is your victory? Where, Death is your power to hurt?... Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!" (vv55, 57)