

# THE NATURE OF OUR RESURRECTION BODY

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## **A Unique Revelation**

The teaching of future bodily resurrection from the dead is a doctrinal distinctive of the Judeo-Christian heritage. Though some of the ancient philosophers sporadically spoke of the possibility of resurrection from the dead, for the most part such a possibility was considered unthinkable by Greek philosophers and poets. Plato affirmed the assured immortality of the soul. Death was regarded as the release of the immortal soul from the prison-house or tomb (*sema*) of the body (*soma*) which is considered as inferior. Even in the Eastern religions and mythologies a universal resurrection was excluded; instead they believed in reincarnation, the immortality of the soul and transmigration of souls (*metempsychosis*, a belief common to many cultures, in which the soul passes from one body to another, either human, animal, or inanimate). The Greek philosophers who listened to Paul's message on Mars Hill in Athens found the concept of bodily resurrection laughable (Acts 17:31-32). Some commentators suggest that the philosophers thought Paul was pointing to a female goddess named "Anastasis" (the Greek word for *resurrection*), consort of the male god Jesus.

Those who try to detect some parallel between the Christian idea of resurrection and the various concepts similar to resurrection in pagan religions fail to note that those religious/philosophical ideas are far removed from the Christian revelation of bodily resurrection by the power of God. The Christian doctrine of resurrection is clearly distinct. The biblical idea of resurrection did not derive from and does not conceptually originate in the Greek, Egyptian or Persian philosophical tradition; it is a unique revelation.

## **The Meaning & Nature of Resurrection**

The teaching of the New Testament concerning resurrection was profoundly shaped by the fact and nature of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the foundation of Christianity. It is one of the essential truths of the Gospel (1 Cor.15:1-4). It is the basis of the hope of our faith. Christ's resurrection is the guarantee of our resurrection.

The Greek noun *anastasis* (*resurrection*, appears 39 times in KJV) literally means "a raising up." The verb *egeirein*, "to raise" was used in Matt. 10:8 for raising the dead (see also John 5:21; 12:1, 9, 17; Acts 26:8; 1 Cor.6:14; 2 Cor.1:9; Heb.11:19). The verb *anistemi*, "to set up again" or to raise," was used by Jesus in relation to the *resurrection* "at the last day" (John 6:39, 40, 44, 54).

Resurrection in the Bible is more than reanimation. It is not just the revival, resuscitation and reassembling of the scattered fragments of decomposed corpses or restoring life into the present physical body. Life in the body of the resurrection will be markedly different from life in

the present physical body. The resurrection is to be raised from the dead in a body than a continued non-corporeal existence. It was spoken of as the “coming forth” (literally “to go out”) of those who are in the graves (John 5:28-29). Our current bodies are weak, natural, perishable, mortal and unglorified. But the risen body will be powerful, spiritual, glorified, incorruptible, impassable and immortal (1 Cor.15:40-44). Paul constantly refers to the resurrected state as being in a *body* (1 Cor.15:35, 37, 38, 40, 44). But it will be a transformed and glorified body. This conviction is clearly based on the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The view of the prominent and highly influential Baptist Theologian, Millard Erickson, on the nature of the resurrection body of Jesus Christ is erroneous and cannot be proved from the Scriptures. According to Erickson, Jesus was not resurrected in an immortal, glorified body. “.....Easter event was something of resuscitation, such as that of Lazarus, rather than a true resurrection.” Jesus received a glorified, immortal body only at the time of ascension (Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 777-78). This is only assumption or an inference without Scriptural validation. If Jesus was not raised immortal, then His resurrection was not a victory over death. Then how can our resurrection body be like His glorious body (Phil.3:21)? The whole doctrinal teaching on resurrection in 1 Cor.15 is that in our resurrection we will be raised to an immortal and incorruptible body just as that of our Lord.

The novelty of the risen body will be like unto the resurrected body of the Lord Jesus Christ. “....who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that he has even to subject all things to Himself” (Phil.3:21). The Apostle John wrote: “We know that when He appears we shall be like Him” (1 John 3:2). We will serve and worship our God throughout all eternity in a literal glorified body.

## **Redemption of the Body**

Our body has yet to be redeemed, but praise be to God, one day at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ (the rapture) it will be! Jesus Christ has already paid for the redemption of our bodies. It is just a matter of time before we receive our glorified bodies. The resurrection of the body is the point of the full culmination of the redemption in Jesus Christ. The complete redemption of the believer will be effected in the resurrection of the body (Rom.8:23; Eph.1:14; 4:30). There is coming a day when our bodies also are going to be redeemed and there will be no more groaning, suffering, death, and decay. It will be the deliverance of the whole person from the dominion of sin and death (1 Cor.15:51-57). The Greeks believed that the body is a prison, materialistic, evil, and fleshly. They could not imagine anything related to the *redemption* of such a body. This is the case in all religious thoughts. But the Gospel of Jesus Christ promises even the redemption of the body; of the whole person. We will live throughout eternity in a redeemed and glorified body.

## The Notable Characteristics of the Believer's Resurrection Body

Along with curiosity, there is also much controversy in relation to the nature of our resurrection body. This brief article is only intended to draw some reasonable conclusions based on the available biblical data. We are not told exactly what we will look like, what age we will appear to be, whether we will bear some resemblance to what we look like now etc. Though the Bible does not address every issue in relation to the nature of the resurrection body so as to answer *all* our questions, we have enough information revealed to us in the pages of the Holy Scriptures so that we may be confident, assured and hopeful in the blessed hope of our glorious destiny.

In the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the very same body that was laid in the tomb itself was resurrected. Though it was the same body, it was resurrected in a glorified state. The wounds from His crucifixion were still visible in His resurrected body (John 20:27). It was a body of flesh and bones (Luke 24:39). He ate earthly food with His friends (Luke 24:42-43). But Jesus' resurrection body also had supernatural properties. He could appear suddenly as though from nowhere (Luke 24:36), He could pass through walls (John 20:19) and He could ascend into heaven (Luke 24:51; Acts 1:9).

In 1 Thessalonians 4 Paul describes how the earthly bodies of believers are reunited with their spirits in the rapture event (4: 14). Through God's omnipotent power and sovereign authority, the spirits of the redeemed will accompany the Lord Jesus in the rapture and will be reunited with their bodies which are resurrected. Our resurrection bodies will be perfected and glorified like unto His glorious body. The body that is raised is the one sown in death. Paul clearly affirms it: "So also the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body; 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 (1 Cor.15:42-44a). Four times Paul speaks of the body in death as being "sown" and not *buried*. The word "sown" indicated the resurrection harvest to follow.

Since our resurrection body will be like the gloried body of our Lord Jesus Christ, we can learn about the nature of our resurrection body from His body as an example. The notable characteristics of the believer's resurrection body are summarized below:

1. Our resurrection body **will be like the post-resurrection glorified body of our Lord Jesus Christ** (Phil.3:20-21; 1John 3:2).
2. Individual **identity** will be retained in the resurrection and we will be able to **recognize** one another. When Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene and called her by name she immediately recognized Him and responded. It seems that we may even retain our voices we had in this life. Even in His resurrection body, Christ retained His identity and He was recognizable (John 20:16). The nail prints were still in His feet and were visible to the disciples. They clearly recognized the Lord as one who had died on the cross (John

20:25-27). The two disciples on the Emmaus road also eventually recognized Jesus (Luke 24:30-31).

The comfort in 1 Thess.4:18 come from the prospect of reunion with loved ones. How can we look forward to a meaningful reunion if we cannot recognize our loved ones in heaven? In the Old Testament, when a person died, “he was gathered to his people” (Gen.25:8; 35:29; 49:29). Does this not indirectly point to recognizing one another in heaven? When David’s infant child died, he confidently expected to see the same child in heaven (2 Samuel 12:23). Peter, James and John recognized Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt.17:1-4). We may be able to recognize people we have never seen before.

3. The resurrection body is **tangible**. Mary held on to a real body when Jesus appeared to her (20:17; Matt.28:9).
4. The resurrection body is **spiritual** (1 Cor.15:44) as opposed to soulish or natural. But it seems that the meaning of “spiritual” goes beyond this. It is a Spirit dominated and powered, supernatural physical body. It will be under the ultimate domination of the Spirit. The control, domination and empowering of the Holy Spirit is the prominent idea in Paul’s use of *pneumatikos* (“spiritual”) in his writings. As Gordon Fee rightly observes, “The transformed body, therefore is not composed of “spirit”; it is a *body* adapted to the eschatological existence that is under the ultimate domination of the Spirit. Thus for Paul, to be truly *pneumatikos* is to bear the likeness of Christ (v.49) in a transformed Body, fitted for the new age” (*The First Epistle to The Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, 786).
5. The body is **physical** though it is unique, glorified, spiritual and other-worldly. It will be a **supernatural and imperishable physical body**. Jesus had a physical resurrection body. The Lord showed the disciples His hands and feet (Luke 24:43). Jesus’ appeal to Thomas to put his finger in His hands and to put into His pierced side (John 20:24-28) proves that Jesus had a physical resurrection body and the wounds from His crucifixion were still visible in His body.
6. Jesus **looked human** in his post resurrection appearances. He was not a phantom (Luke 24:39). He looked human in every regard and the disciples never questioned His humanity. He conversed a long time with the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-27). They never felt anything “strange” about His appearance. This will be true of us too. Our future bodies though glorified and supernatural will be similar to our present bodies. The possibility is that each believer may continue to look as he did in this world (but without weakness and the signs of age). Some have suggested that in the new, glorified and transformed appearance we will all be in our youth.

According to the foremost eschatology scholar of our times, John Walvoord, “It is probable that in the resurrection our bodies will be improved, and older people will be returned to comparative youth. Some have suggested that the apparent age of people in heaven will be about thirty years of age, the ideal borderline between youth and maturity,

illustrated in the fact that the Old Testament priests were thirty years of age when they began their ministry and Christ was little more than thirty when He began His public ministry” (*Understanding Christian Theology*, ed. Charles R. Swindoll & Roy B. Zuck, 1274). These suggestions may be true, but it is difficult to be dogmatic about these things, and let us never go beyond what the Scriptures teach or suggest.

The question of **gender** in heaven (or in the resurrection body) also is related to the issue discussed above. This is not explicitly addressed in the Bible. It is important for us to note that Jesus retained His gender after His death and resurrection. There is no indication in the Bible that we will lose or change our gender in resurrection. Matt.22:30 (“For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven”) only means that there is no married state in heaven. Resurrected saints will be like angels who do not produce offspring. This does not mean that people will be genderless in heaven. Angels are usually referred to in the masculine gender in the Scriptures. Gender is an integral part of God’s creation order and is vitally related to God’s sovereign plan and purpose. It is more than physical; it is of divine origin. It is the way each of us relate to God and fulfill God’s plan for our lives and ultimately glorify God. It seems that in the resurrected state gender also will be perfected and retained.

7. Jesus **ate** real earthly food (Luke 24:42-43; John 21:12-15). **We will be able to eat** and enjoy food, but we will not be driven to it by necessity of nourishment, health reasons, or craving. Our glorified bodies will be empowered by the Spirit and weakness and fatigue will be no more. Jesus mentioned about eating and drinking in the Kingdom (Matt.26:29; Mark 14:25). Though the Millennial kingdom is in view here, we will have already received our resurrection bodies.

One of the delights of the New Jerusalem is the tree of life, bearing twelve kinds of fruit (Rev.22:1-3). But the text does not say whether we will actually eat the fruit of the tree of life. The condition described in Rev.7:16 of the multitude before the throne of God (“They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore.....”) contrasts to the earthly experience of these saints. This verse is not really addressing the question of food in heaven, but rather affirms the fact that starvation, thirst, and the burning heat of the desert are forever past for them. Some theologians suggest that since the resurrection body is supernaturally empowered and sustained (since it is a spiritual body, 1 Cor.15:44), we will not eat for nourishment but for pleasure and celebration.

8. The resurrection body will have supernatural powers enabling it to **move through space and through other material objects** without hindrance as Jesus did (John. 20:19; Acts 1:9-11). It will also have the **ability to appear and disappear** (Luke 24:31). The resurrection body will be completely free from the restrictions imposed by sin and the fallen nature.
9. It will be **incorruptible** and **immortal** (1 Cor.15:53). This verse explains what happens at the rapture. This “incorruptible” refers to the bodies of the saints who have died and returned to dust. They will put on *incorruption* (that which is imperishable and cannot be

deteriorated or decayed). This “mortal” refers to the saints who are still alive in body subject to death at the time of the rapture. Their bodies will put on *immortality*. Thus the new body of the believers through resurrection and rapture will be changed to incorruptible and immortal.

10. It will be a **glorious body** (Phil.3:21; 1 Cor.15:43). There may be shining radiance and splendor coming from it, probably some similarity to Jesus’ body on the mount of Transfiguration (17:2).

In 1 Cor.15: 42-44, Paul gives four sets of contrasts between our earthly bodies and glorified bodies: *Corruption/Incorruption; Dishonor/Glory; Weakness /Power; Natural/Spiritual*. Norman Geisler summarizes the nature of the resurrection body as: *Numerical Identity* (indistinguishably identical to the pre-resurrection body), *Materiality* (Physical), *Immortality, Glory, Mobility, and Agility* (*Systematic Theology*, Volume Four, 269-71).

Our natural bodies are suited for living in this world only. It cannot inherit the kingdom of God. It is characterized by sin, temptation, weakness, decay, and death. But the glorified resurrection body will be perfectly suited for living in the direct presence of God, pleasing and serving Him throughout all eternity.

## Conclusion

Let us not assume that we have all knowledge and can answer all questions about the unfathomable mysteries of things to come. On the other hand, many Christians do not take the Word of God seriously and are quite ignorant of the exciting truths related to our future destiny. They are little concerned about what is to come at the end of this life. Depending on God’s revelation in His infallible Word, and avoiding speculations, we have tried to answer some of the basic questions in relation to the nature of the believer’s resurrection body. Diligent students of the Scriptures may be able to see more characteristics of the resurrection body through their own personal studies. We have only touched upon the most obvious ones.

After the most extensive treatment on resurrection in all of Scripture, Paul concludes 1 Cor.15 with this note of triumph: “But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable and the mortal will have put on immortality, and then will come about the saying that is written, “Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1Cor.15:54-57).

What a day that will be! We look forward to it in hope and in confidence. Let us join Paul and sing this victory anthem and celebrate the blessed hope before us. Rejoice! The best is yet to come!