

From William Barclay's Daily Study Bible:

An introduction to 1 Corinthians, Chapter 15, on the meaning of "Resurrection of the Body"

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Chapter 15

JESUS' RESURRECTION AND OURS (1Cor 15)

1Cor 15 is both one of the greatest and one of the most difficult chapters in the New Testament. Not only is it in itself difficult, but it has also given to the creed a phrase which many people have grave difficulty in affirming, for it is from this chapter that we mainly derive the idea of the resurrection of the body. The chapter will be far less difficult if we study it against its background, and even that troublesome phrase will become quite clear and acceptable when we realize what Paul really meant by it. So then, before we study the chapter, there are certain things we would do well to have in mind.

(i) It is of great importance to remember that the Corinthians were denying not the Resurrection of Jesus Christ but the resurrection of the body; and what Paul was insistent upon was that if a man denied the resurrection of the body he thereby denied the Resurrection of Jesus Christ and therefore emptied the Christian message of its truth and the Christian life of its reality.

(ii) In any early Christian church there must have been two backgrounds, for in all churches there were Jews and Greeks.

First, there was the Jewish background. To the end of the day the Sadducees denied that there was any life after death at all. There was therefore one line of Jewish thought which completely denied both the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the body (Ac 23:8). In the Old Testament there is very little hope of anything that can be called life after death. According to the general Old Testament belief all men, without distinction, went to Sheol after death. Sheol, often wrongly translated Hell, was a gray land beneath the world, where the dead lived a shadowy existence, without strength, without light, cut off alike from men and from God. The Old Testament is full of this bleak, grim pessimism regarding what is to happen after death.

For in death there is no remembrance of thee: in Sheol
who can give thee praise? (Ps 6:5).

What profit is there in my death if I go down to the pit?
Will the dust praise thee? Will it tell of thy faithfulness?
(Ps 30:9).

Dost thou work wonders for the dead? Do the shades rise up to praise thee? Is thy steadfast love declared in the grave? Or thy faithfulness in Abaddon? Are thy wonders known in the darkness, or thy saving help in the land of forgetfulness? (Ps 88:10-12).

The dead do not praise the Lord, nor do any that go down into silence. (Ps 115:17).

For Sheol cannot thank thee, death cannot praise thee; those who go down to the pit cannot hope for thy faithfulness. (Isa 38:18).

Look away from me, that I may know gladness, before I depart and be no more. (Ps 39:13).

But he who is joined with all the living has hope; for a living dog is better than a dead lion. For the living know that they will die; but the dead know nothing.... Whatever your hand finds to do do it with your might; for there is no work, or thought, or knowledge, or wisdom, in Sheol to which you are going. (Ecc 9:4-5, 10).

Who shall give praise to the Most High in the grave? (Ecc 17:27).

The dead that are in the grave, whose breath is taken from their bodies, will give unto the Lord neither glory nor righteousness. (Baruch 2:17).

J. E. McFadyen, a great Old Testament scholar, says that this lack of a belief in immortality in the Old Testament is due "to the power with which those men apprehended God in this world." He goes on to say, "There are few more wonderful things than this in the long story of religion, that for centuries men lived the noblest lives, doing their duties and bearing their sorrows, without hope of future reward; and they did this because in all their going out and coming in they were very sure of God."

It is true that in the Old Testament there are some few, some very few, glimpses of a real life to come. There were times when a man felt that, if God be God at all, there must be something which would reverse the incomprehensible verdicts of this world. So Job cries out,

Still, I know One to champion me at last,
to stand up for me upon earth.
This body may break up, but even then
my life shall have a sight of God.
(Job 19:25-27. Moffatt).

The real feeling of the saint was that even in this life a man might enter into a relationship with God so close and so precious that not even death could break it.

My body also dwells secure. For thou dost not give me up to Sheol, or let thy godly one see the Pit. Thou dost show me the path of life; in thy presence there is fulness of joy; in thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore. (Ps 16:9-11).

Thou dost hold my right hand. Thou dost guide me with thy counsel, and afterward thou wilt receive me to glory. (Ps 73:24).

It is also true that in Israel the immortal hope developed. Two things helped that development. (a) Israel was the chosen people, and yet her history was one continued tale of disaster. Men began to feel that it required another world to redress the balance. (b) For many centuries it is true to say that the individual hardly existed. God was the God of the nation and the individual was an unimportant unit. But as the centuries went on religion became more and more personal. God became not the God of the nation but the friend of every individual; and so men began dimly and instinctively to feel that once a man knows God and is known by him, a relationship has been created which not even death can break.

(iii) When we turn to the Greek world, we must firmly grasp one thing, which is at the back of the whole chapter. The Greeks had an instinctive fear of death. Euripides wrote, "Yet mortals, burdened with countless ills, still love life. They long for each coming day, glad to bear the thing they know, rather than face death the unknown." (Fragment 813). But on the whole the Greeks, and that part of the world influenced by Greek thought, did believe in the immortality of the soul. But for them the immortality of the soul involved the complete dissolution of the body.

They had a proverb, "The body is a tomb." "I am a poor soul," said one of them, "shackled to a corpse." "It pleased me," said Seneca, "to enquire into the eternity of the soul--nay! to believe in it. I surrendered myself to that great hope." But he also says, "When the day shall come which shall part this mixture of divine and human, here, where I found it, I will leave my body, myself I will give back to the gods." Epictetus writes, "When God does not supply what is necessary, he is sounding the signal for retreat--he has opened the door and says to you 'Come!' But whither? To nothing terrible, but to whence you came, to the things which are dear and kin to you, to the elements. What in you was fire shall go to fire, earth to earth, water to water." Seneca talks about things at death "being resolved into their ancient elements." For Plato "the body is the antithesis of the soul, as the source of all weaknesses as opposed to what alone is capable of independence and goodness." We can see this best in the Stoic belief. To the Stoic God was fiery spirit, purer than anything on earth. What gave men life was that a spark of this divine fire came and dwelt in a man's body. When a man died, his body simply dissolved into the elements of which it was made, but the divine spark returned to God and was

absorbed in the divinity of which it was a part.

For the Greek immortality lay precisely in getting rid of the body. For him the resurrection of the body was unthinkable. Personal immortality did not really exist because that which gave men life was absorbed again in God the source of all life.

(iv) Paul's view was quite different. If we begin with one immense fact, the rest will become clear. The Christian belief is that after death individuality will survive, that you will still be you and I will still be I. Beside that we have to set another immense fact. To the Greek the body could not be consecrated. It was matter, the source of all evil, the prison-house of the soul. But to the Christian the body is not evil. Jesus, the Son of God, has taken this human body upon him and therefore it is not contemptible because it has been inhabited by God. To the Christian, therefore the life to come involves the total man, body and soul.

Now it is easy to misinterpret and to caricature the doctrine of the resurrection of the body. Celsus, who lived about A.D. 220, a bitter opponent of Christianity, did this very thing long ago. How can those who have died rise with their identical bodies? he demands. "Really it is the hope of worms! For what soul of a man would any longer wish for a body that had rotted?" It is easy to cite the case of a person smashed up in an accident or dying of cancer.

But Paul never said that we would rise with the body with which we died. He insisted that we would have a spiritual body. What he really meant was that a man's personality would survive. It is almost impossible to conceive of personality without a body, because it is through the body that the personality expresses itself. What Paul is contending for is that after death the individual remains. He did not inherit the Greek contempt of the body but believed in the resurrection of the whole man. He will still be himself; he will survive as a person. That is what Paul means by the resurrection of the body. Everything of the body and of the soul that is necessary to make a man a person will survive, but, at the same time, all things will be new, and body and spirit will alike be very different from earthly things, for they will alike be divine.

—Barclay's Daily Study Bible (NT)