

“Physical and Spiritual”

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Rev. Andy Call

1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-55, 57 (NRSVUE)

³⁵ But someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?” ³⁶ Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. ³⁷ And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. ³⁸ But God gives it a body as he has chosen and to each kind of seed its own body.

⁴² So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. ⁴³ It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. ⁴⁴ It is sown a physical body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. ⁴⁵ Thus it is written, “The first man, Adam, became a living being”; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. ⁴⁶ But it is not the spiritual that is first but the physical and then the spiritual. ⁴⁷ The first man was from the earth, made of dust; the second man is from heaven. ⁴⁸ As one of dust, so are those who are of the dust, and as one of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. ⁴⁹ Just as we have borne the image of the one of dust, we will also bear the image of the one of heaven.

⁵⁰ What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. ⁵¹ Look, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, ⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. ⁵³ For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. ⁵⁴ When this perishable body puts on imperishability and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

“Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

⁵⁵ “Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?”

⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

When Paul addressed the topic of Resurrection, he took on a subject that was as challenging to faith in his time as it is today. In many ways, it was harder for the earliest followers of Jesus to believe than for us, since we have the benefit of two millennia of church teaching and cultural expectations to shape our understanding. The early Christians believed and proclaimed that Christ had risen. But it is one thing to say that Jesus rose from the dead, yet another thing entirely to expect resurrection for themselves and their loved ones. Though the early church did not possess the medical or scientific knowledge we have today, they were not completely ignorant, either. They understood what happened to bodies after they die. They were probably more closely acquainted with the realities of death than we are today. Their friends and loved ones had died years, decades, generations before. How would resurrection work for them? What would it mean to be raised? They believed, but they had questions.

If resurrection presented a challenge *within* the faith community, it was preposterous for most people outside it. Even some of the churches Paul had founded were beginning to waver in their faith under the withering criticism they faced. The letters Paul wrote to the church in Corinth were written in response to letters Paul had received. While those preceding letters no longer exist, we can reconstruct from Paul's writing some of what those letters contained. When Paul rhetorically asks a question, he is likely echoing a question that those earlier letters contained. So, we can be reasonably certain that resurrection was on their minds. |

“But someone will ask, ‘How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?’” Those are not unreasonable questions, are they? And yet, Paul responds out of frustration, either with the question itself or from being asked again what he has already answered. Perhaps he senses he is being undermined by those who are intent on undoing his work in Corinth. Either way, his temper bursts forth. “Fool!” he writes.

This is not Paul's most pastoral moment. We would counsel him to curb his emotions, to respond to the merits of the question and not to be reactive. But Paul will be Paul. Yet he quickly regains his composure and goes on to offer a more measured and thoughtful response. “What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.” Then he lays out a systematic teaching on resurrection, using the example of a seed. A seed does not look like what it produces. From simple observation, there is nothing about a seed itself that suggests what it will become when planted. We cannot see the life it contains when it is just a seed. But after it is planted, life springs forth. |

So it is with us, says Paul: |

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 physical body; it is raised a spiritual body. |

We have a *physical* body in this life, but in eternity we will have a *spiritual* body. To further support his case, Paul uses the example of Adam, the first human, and Jesus, whom he refers to as the “last Adam.” God created *Adam* – which translates literally as “dirt creature” – out of the earth, and through him came all of the humans that followed. Jesus, through his Resurrection, opened the path to eternal life for all of us; he is the “firstborn” of eternity. Adam was the “man of dust;” Christ is the “man of heaven.” In this life, we have an earthly body, as Jesus once did; in eternity, we will have a heavenly one. Though the two are distinct, there is continuity between them through our spirit. We are in this life both physical and spiritual beings. Though the physical body has an expiration date, the spiritual does not. |

The questions in the Corinthian church may have been driven by more than curiosity or a defense of the faith. Perhaps there were other, more pragmatic matters on their mind. One of the reasons we still wrestle with these questions relates to our burial practices. If we believe in the resurrection of the body, how should we handle the dead? Is it appropriate for Christians to be cremated? Is it okay to donate our organs? You may have wrestled with these questions in your own planning or with your family. These are real questions, and they are important. |

Early Christians eschewed the practice of cremation, driven at least in part by memory and trauma. The Romans sometimes burned the corpses of Christian martyrs to prevent them from rising again. (The Romans either didn't understand the concept of resurrection, or they thought that by doing this they would destroy the hope of Jesus's followers. They were wrong on both counts.) And while there are other examples of cremation as an act of desecration in ancient times, there are also diaspora cultures where cremation was a profound gesture of

respect. Throughout history, there have been times when cremation was necessary if not chosen, like during plagues or natural disasters. In some places, limited space or geological factors make burial impractical, if not impossible. Still, cremation was relatively rare among Christians in western culture until the last 200 years or so, but it is much more commonplace today (though still fiercely contested in some circles). Scripture reminds us that we are dust, and to dust we shall return. How we get there is not prescribed. Paul reminds us that “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.”

As we wrestle with these questions, Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians can guide us. While Paul is (understandably) short on the details, he makes a strong and impassioned point: Resurrection is not about a *physical* body. What will be raised is a *spiritual* body, as different from our earthly body as a tree is from a seed. *How does that work? What will we look like? How will we recognize one another? Will we still have the relationships that were important to us in this life?* Some things are beyond our knowing this side of eternity. But Paul assures us that one day we will be reunited with those dear to us. They will be who they have always been, yet the fullest and truest and most redeemed version of themselves. And we *will* know one another – more completely than ever in this life.

While it is important in our tenuous understanding of resurrection to distinguish between the physical and the spiritual, it is imperative that we do not completely separate the two. In our culture, we have a tendency toward binary thinking, an either/or mindset: good or bad, happy or sad, traditional or modern, sacred or secular, physical or spiritual. Who we will be in the life to come is a continuation of who we are in this life. We already carry the spirit within us. In fact, as long as we live, the two are inseparable. We are *both* physical *and* spiritual beings. What we do with the one affects the other because the two are, in fact, one.

In the early days of the church, even before the Bible as we know it fully took shape, there were competing factions within the broader Christian community. One of those factions was Gnosticism (derived from the Greek word *gnosis*, which means “knowledge”). The Gnostics believed that our true nature was spiritual, and that the physical world was evil and corrupt. Once humans gained sufficient knowledge and enlightenment, their spirits would be set free from the prison of their earthly bodies. Some even suggested that Jesus himself was never fully human, only a divine spirit sent to give us the necessary knowledge to escape this world.

The Church considered Gnosticism a heresy and addressed some of its errors in the early church councils. Using the gospels and other writings, they more fully developed an understanding of incarnation and Jesus’s physical life, death, and resurrection. They also noted that Jesus spent his life healing and teaching. Corrupt or not, this world was important enough for God to enter it as one of us, and our physical lives mattered so much to Jesus that he dedicated himself to bringing healing and wholeness, both physically and spiritually.

This is one of the reasons *we* take physical needs so seriously as followers of Jesus: responding in times of crisis, helping our neighbors, feeding the hungry and advocating for a more just society where no one goes hungry. It will not do to “save souls” while leaving people in a living hell. The Letter of James says:

Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. (James 2:15-17, NIV)

At times or in movements that the church has forgotten that our purpose is to continue doing what Jesus did, the consequences have been devastating: the crusades, the inquisition, slavery, colonizing missions. We need to meet *both* physical needs *and* spiritual needs. If we want to bring healing and wholeness to the spirit, we must also bring healing and wholeness to the body.

But where is the line between the physical and the spiritual? Is thinking about a “line” between the two even appropriate or helpful? How does an *embodied faith* intersect with the *spiritual life*? There are some questions that are too big for us to answer completely in this life, some that seem too big even to wrestle with. But wrestle, we do, because it is in the asking that we receive, in the seeking that we find, in the knocking that doors are opened.

While we are short on certainties, there are some things about which we can be reasonably confident. One of them is this: the God who can raise to life those whose remains have been buried for centuries, those whose places of burial have long since disappeared, and those whose remains have not or cannot be recovered, can certainly raise to life those who are cremated as well as those who are buried. Neither time nor distance is a barrier to the One who holds time in his hands and created all that exists. After all, *what is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown a physical body; it is raised a spiritual body.*

And I am confident in this:

When this perishable body puts on imperishability and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

“Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

“Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?”

But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.



2537 Lee Rd., Cleveland Heights, OH, 44118 | 216-321-8880 | cotsumc.org