

The Resurrection of the Body

In probably most funerals you will attend in South Africa, you will hear someone say of the deceased, “he's gone to a better place.” And while that may or may not be true depending on the person, the statement itself shows that most people believe in the immortality of the soul. That is, most people, even non-religious or non-Christian people hold to some kind of idea that the immaterial part of you exists after the death of your body, that the part of you that is rational, moral, and personal, continues on. This is known as the immortality of the soul.

You might then be surprised to hear that the immortality of the soul is not the final or ultimate hope of the Christian. The immortality of the soul, understood in isolation is actually a Greek idea. Some of the pagan Greek philosophers used to say, “The body is a tomb”. For them, the greatest release was death, where the soul could now be freed from its prison, and live in unfettered freedom in some transcendental realm.

Now the Bible does teach that the soul exists after death. God's Word does not describe man as a monad, where if the body dies, the soul goes out of existence. It makes a distinction. Jesus said to the dying thief next to him on the Cross, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” Jesus expected conscious existence in Paradise after death. Paul said “We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord.” (2 Corinthians 5:8)

But that is where the overlap between Christian doctrine and Greek philosophy ends, regarding life after death.

Because in the Bible, a disembodied existence after death is not the final state, not the desired end. As early as the book of Job, perhaps composed around the time of Jacob, we read of the hope of resurrection:

For I know *that* my Redeemer lives, And He shall stand at last on the earth;²⁶ And after my skin is destroyed, this *I know*, That in my flesh I shall see God, (Job 19:25–26)

And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, Some to everlasting life, Some to shame *and* everlasting contempt. (Daniel 12:2)

The hope of Israelite believers was not disembodied existence, but the full restoration of the body, reunited with the soul. The doctrine of the resurrection of the body says that the body will be fully re-constituted, without any defect or corruption, to live on forever. The immortality of the body and soul, is what biblical religion focuses on.

It was this very doctrine that divided the Pharisees from the Sadducees, since the Sadducees had rejected it. It was this doctrine that the Greek philosophers scoffed at when Paul preached on Mars Hill.³² And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, “We will hear you again on this *matter*.” (Acts 17:32) For the Greeks, the body was the problem: why would you want it brought back and renewed? But biblically, this is the hope.

So why is the hope of resurrection so crucial to the Gospel, to biblical doctrine?

First, resurrection means that God saves all of you. To be human is to have a body. The human being is body, soul, and spirit. The material part of you is your body, the immaterial part is soul and spirit. In fact, you can speak of a human being as an embodied soul, or alternatively, an ensouled body. Both are true. Your spirit without your body is compared by Paul to the condition of

nakedness. We are incomplete without our bodies.

In fact, one of the modern scientific attempts to obtain immortality is called transhumanism. Here they believe they will be able to transfer human consciousness to a machine, to a computer, to a robot, and so the disembodied human will supposedly live on forever. But this is a deep rejection of being image-bearers, of fulfilling our design.

If being human means having a body then salvation includes your body. Jesus does not only redeem your immaterial soul, but His resurrection is the firstfruits of yours. Salvation is not only forgiving you your sins, but eradicating the effects of sin: corruption, decay, and death. The day of resurrection is the day when sin's effects are truly past.

Second, the resurrection of the body shows that creation and matter is good, not evil. If material existence was inherently evil, then God the Son could not have taken flesh and had a body. God would not have raised His Son from the dead, and there would be no promise that we will rise from the dead. And so there would be no promise of a New Earth. Resurrected people are not disembodied spirits without form and shape and space. Resurrected people take up space and live in a place. So the Bible predicts that God will remake this world into a perfect world, where we will live in our bodies. The joys and delights of creation will be there to be experienced with resurrected eyes, ears, nose, tongue and skin. Creation is good, not evil.

Creation and matter is not evil, but good, and resurrection shows that God is committed to purging it of sin and restoring it to original perfection. All philosophies that teach the body is evil, or food is evil, or marriage is evil stand refuted by the doctrine of resurrection.

Third, the resurrection of the body shows that there will be continuity from this life to the next. Resurrection is the re-constitution of you, not someone else. Your body is the distinct physical manifestation of you. Resurrection says, we pick up where we left off when death interrupted our lives. Free of sin, free of corruption, we now go on to love God and neighbour in immortal strength. You will not leave your memories, or your learning, or your abilities behind. You continue on, but now without the fear of death. Of course, the resurrected body is not just a fresh coat of paint over a crumbling exterior, or a little Polyfilla here and there. Paul tells us the change will be radical.

⁴² So also *is* the resurrection of the dead. *The body* is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. 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 natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body. (1 Corinthians 15:42–44) ...⁴⁷ The first man *was* of the earth, *made* of dust; the second Man *is* the Lord from heaven. ⁴⁸ As *was* the *man* of dust, so also *are* those *who are made* of dust; and as *is* the heavenly *Man*, so also *are* those *who are* heavenly. ⁴⁹ And as we have borne the image of the *man* of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly *Man*. ⁵⁰ Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption. ⁵¹ Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall 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 incorruptible, and we shall be changed. (1 Corinthians 15:47–52)

Continuity. Indeed, how could God reward or punish us in the next life if we are not the same people from this life? But we are and we will be. You will not be someone else in eternity. You will be you. Which is why the Bible keeps reminding us to live for eternity, to sow to the Spirit, to live a life of eternal significance.

This is what we confess when we confess to believing in the resurrection of the body.

The Life Everlasting

We come to the very last phrase of the Apostles' Creed, “and the life everlasting”. You'll notice that

the Creed deliberately put two phrases that are similar but distinct: the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Last time, we discussed why the resurrection of the body is such an important doctrine, and why it is more than the Greek idea of the immortality of the soul.

But having said that, we do believe in immortality, in everlasting life.

When we say we believe in the life everlasting, we are referring to everlasting life both in quantity and in quality.

When it comes to quantity, we believe the human being's life is a line with a beginning, but with no end. It extends forever. Why? Because in Genesis 2 we read that “⁷ And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being. (Genesis 2:7)

Every human being possesses the breath of life that came from God Himself. Our living souls cannot go out of existence, because we are the breath of the immortal God. God gave life to the animals, but to us He gave Himself. Our souls and spirits have immortality, not on our own, but because of Him. In Him we live, and move, and have our being.

All humans sense that we live forever. “Also He has put eternity in their hearts” (Ecclesiastes 3:11) We do not accept death as normal; we only accept it as inevitable. But every time it strikes, it feels invasive, alien and unnatural. Transhumanists and some scientists are trying to cheat death through technology. Some people try to cheat death through spiritism, contacting the dead, beliefs in reincarnation. These are false, but they show that people have eternity in their hearts. That's because once you have self-conscious, rational awarenesses, you have it forever. You expect to always be, to always know and live and experience.

Physical death, as we know, does not destroy the soul and spirit. All people, including the lost, will be raised up to face judgement. And all those who have rejected God, the source of life, will also have everlasting life, but in an inverse sense. Daniel 12:2 says that “many who sleep in the dust shall awake to shame *and* everlasting contempt”. Matthew 25:46 says that the wicked “will go away into everlasting punishment”. 2 Thessalonians 1:9 says that “these shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power”. Those who reject God will experience a kind of everlastingness, but it is the opposite of life. It is contempt, punishment, and destruction, life diminishing forever, life weakening, decaying, dissipating, fading, but never disappearing altogether.

But the creed is focused not on the everlasting death of the unrighteous, but the everlasting life of the righteous. Thirteen times the Bible uses this phrase; 32 times the phrase *eternal life*. To those in Christ, the promise of the Bible is what what we did in Eden will be undone. There God told Adam that if he disobeyed, he would surely die. There the Serpent told Eve, you shall not surely die. And there, in disobedience, we died, and began dying.

Through the finished work of Christ, through death and resurrection, Revelation 21 tells us the following: ⁴ And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.” (Revelation 21:4)

No more death. After the Great White Throne Judgement, after the wicked are sent away into the ever receding place of Gehenna, death is no longer a reality. No more separations. No more grief. No more parting. No more weakening of body. No more fear of crossing over. No more loss of time, or fear of losing out. Now, forever, there is life. No endeavour, no pursuit, no pleasure, no joy will be limited by a finite amount of time, overshadowed by looming threat of sickness, age.

But everlasting life is not just life in infinite quantity. Everlasting, eternal life has to do with the *quality* of the life, the very nature of life. The Bible speaks of those who while alive are really dead. You can be alive and really be deadening your soul, dissipating your energies, allowing your soul and its powers to corrode, rust, and decay into nothing. Conversely, your body may be dying, but you may be coming more and more alive.

When Jesus came, he announced, “I have come that they may have life, and that they may have *it* more abundantly (John 10:10). Not just life, but life in a concentrated, condensed, undiluted form. We sometimes talk about energetic people as lively people, or we speak of livening things up, bringing life back to a place. Life in its maximal form is zealous, abounding in strength, exuberant, overflowing with joy. We associate this with the energy of small children or young animals.

Now, did you ever think that this maximal life is what the saints will have forever, undiminished by bodily weakness, by emotional weariness, by fatigue. This is probably one of the reasons Heaven is so noisy, because of the exuberance of life.

And indeed, who, then is the liveliest of all beings? God Himself is the perfection of exuberance, of joy, of delight, of energy.

This is why the Bible tells us that eternal life is something that begins the day you are saved and the Spirit comes to dwell within. “And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. ¹² He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. ¹³ These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may *continue to* believe in the name of the Son of God. (1 John 5:11–13)

A Christian has begun to experience this new quality of abundant life: zeal, joy, enthusiasm, hope, love, excitement, creativity, peace, flourishing. As an inner quality, you should know the feeling of desire. Only, our unredeemed bodies are like creaking doors on their hinges, like old cars with groaning, squeaking, hissing sounds. Inside, we have an eternal weight of glory just wanting to burst the cocoon into life. But our outer man wears away, perishes more and more, as we eagerly await the redemption of our bodies at the return of Christ. On that day, everlasting life will be complete: the eternal life we have already begun in Christ will be united with an unfading body, fitted and strengthened to handle the joys and pleasures of Heaven, strong enough, and youthful enough to worship and play and make and create without the need for rest.

¹⁷ And the Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let him who hears say, “Come!” And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely. (Revelation 22:17)