

The Resurrection

“No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1Cor 2:9).

Figuratively, the body is used in the New Testament in an ambivalent way. On the one hand, it can become a “sinful body” (Rom 6:6) and the “body of death” (Rom 7:24), when it becomes an instrument of sin. On the other hand, it can become the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19) and the means of glorifying God (1 Cor 6:20), when it becomes an instrument in the service of Christ. Redemption means not the removal of the soul from the body, but the *renewal* and ultimate *resurrection* of the whole man.

Murray Harris, an American Biblical scholar, says in his article on *Resurrection and Immortality*:

“Man is not immortal because he possesses or is a soul. He becomes immortal because God transforms him by raising him from the dead”

Claude Tresmontant, a French Catholic Dominican scholar, contrasts the Biblical “resurrection” of the whole person with the traditional dualistic view. He writes:

“But the Judeo-Christian teaching on the resurrection is quite a different matter. It does not mean that a part of man—his soul—will be freed by discarding the other part—his material body; biblical teaching implies that the whole man will be saved.”

Reinhold Niebuhr, a renowned American theologian and long-time professor at Union Theological Seminary, contrasts the Biblical wholistic view of human nature with the classical dualistic view.

“All the plausible and implausible proofs for the immortality of the soul are efforts on the part of the human mind to master and control the consummation of life. all try to prove in one way or another that an eternal element in the nature of man is worthy and capable of survival beyond death. But every mystic or rational technique which seeks to extricate the eternal element tends to deny the meaningfulness of the historical unity of body and soul; and with it the meaningfulness of the whole historical process with its infinite elaborations of that unity.”

R.G. Owen, the former provost of Trinity College, University of Toronto, in his impressive study on the Biblical view of human nature titled *Body and Soul*, offers a penetrating analysis of the contrasts between the Greek dualistic view and the Biblical wholistic view of human nature. Owen concludes:

“Man is a unified psychosomatic whole and there can be no detachable part of man that survives physical death. The Bible assumes that human nature is a unity; in the New Testament it teaches that man’s ultimate destiny involves the ‘resurrection of the body.’”

Emil Brunner, a well-known Swiss theologian, writes:

“Somewhere in the Christian faith there must have been some opening through which this foreign doctrine could penetrate. Assuredly, from the Biblical standpoint, it is God alone who possesses immortality. The opinion that we men are immortal because our soul is of an indestructible essence is, once for all, irreconcilable with the Biblical view of God and man.”

Emil Brunner's analysis of the effect of "dualistic thinking" in Christian theology:

- (1). **Dualism makes death innocuous.** (See Appendix II: The Death of Socrates and the Savior)
- (2). **Dualism robs evil of its sting.** (See Appendix II: The Death of Socrates and the Savior)
- (3). **Dualism has sin only affecting the body.**
- (4). **Dualism gives men an excuse to sin** (i.e. "evil is in my body.")
- (5). **Dualism turns sin into sensual impulses rather than a whole man rebellion against God.**

Death as Sleep in the Old Testament and in the New Testament

The most common Hebrew word for sleep is *shachav*. It is used in the frequently occurring expression so-and-so "*slept with his fathers*" (Gen 28:11; Deut 31:16; 2 Sam 7:12; 1 Kings 2:10). Beginning with its initial application to Moses ("Behold, you are about to sleep with your fathers" – Deut 31:16), and then to David ("Thou shall sleep with thy fathers" – 2 Sam 7:12, KJV), and Job ("Now I shall sleep in the dust" – Job 7:21, KJV), we find this beautiful euphemism for death running like an unbroken thread all through the Old and New Testaments, ending with Peter's statement that "*the fathers fell asleep*" (2 Pet 3:4). Commenting on these references, Basil Atkinson aptly observes: "Thus the kings and others who died are said to sleep with their fathers. If their spirits were alive in another world, could this possibly be regularly said without a hint that the real person was not sleeping at all?"

Another Hebrew word for "sleep" is *yashen*. This word occurs both as a verb, "to sleep" (Jer 51:39, 57; Ps 13:3) and as a noun, "sleep." The latter is found in the well-known verse of Daniel 12:2: "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt." Notice that in this passage both the godly and ungodly are sleeping in the dust of the earth and both will be resurrected at the End.

A third Hebrew word used for the sleep of death is *shenah*. Job asks this rhetorical question: "But man dies and is laid low; man breathes his last, and where is he?" (Job 14:10). His answer is: "As waters fail from a lake, and a river wastes away and dries up, so man lies down and rises not again; till the heavens are no more he will not awake, or be roused out of his sleep (*shenah*)" (Job 14:11-12; cf. Ps 76:5; 90:5). Here is a graphic description of death. When a person takes the last breath, "where is he?" that is, "what is left of him?" Nothing. He does not exist anymore. He becomes like a lake or river whose water has dried up. He sleeps in the grave and "will not awake" till the day of Resurrection.

Death is described as sleep in the New Testament more frequently than in the Old. The reason may be that the hope of the resurrection, which is clarified and strengthened by Christ's resurrection, gives new meaning to the sleep of death from which believers will awaken at Christ's coming. As Christ slept in the tomb prior to His resurrection, so believers sleep in the grave while awaiting their resurrection. There are two Greek words meaning "sleep" which are used in the New Testament. The first is *koimao* which is used fourteen times for the sleep of death. A derivative of this Greek noun is *koimeeteerion*, from which comes our word *cemetery*. Incidentally, the root of this word is also the root of the word "home"—*oikos*." So the home and the cemetery are connected because both are a sleeping-place. The second Greek word is *katheudein*, which is generally used for ordinary sleep. In the New Testament it is used four times for the sleep of death (Matt 9:24; Mark 5:39; Luke 8:52; Eph 5:14; 1 Thess 4:14).

The Biblical Teaching of the Resurrection

In the New Testament the *Parousia* (i.e. 'coming of Christ') is always characterized by writers as *Christ's coming down to mankind* rather than *individual souls going up to Him*. Christ's return is not "a pie in the sky when you die" but a real meeting on this earth between resurrected believers and the King of Kings.

In the Bible there is a rejection of the dualism of the material world below and the spiritual above. The final salvation inaugurated by Christ's coming is regarded in Scripture not as an escape from but a transformation of this earth. The Biblical view of the world to come is not a spiritual heavenly retreat inhabited by glorified souls, but this physical earth populated by resurrected saints (Is 66:22; Rev 21:1).

The universal gathering of all believers will be made possible at Christ's Return by two major events:

- (1). The resurrection of the sleeping saints**
- (2). The transformation of the living saints.**

The resurrection and translation of all the believers are clearly placed in the Scripture at the time of Christ's Return, sometimes called "the last day" (see **John 6:39-40, 44, 54**).

Paul explains that as death came through the first Adam, eternal life comes from the last Adam.

"As in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ" (**1 Cor 15:22-23**; cf. **Phil 3:20-21**).

Paul teaches that both the resurrection of all the sleeping saints and the translation of all living believers will take place at the same time in conjunction with Christ's Coming:

"For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord" (**1 Thessalonians 4:16-17**).

Lazarus' resurrection is a beautiful type of our final resurrection.

"Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep [kekoimetai], but I go to awake him out of sleep" (John 11:11). The people misunderstood, so Jesus plainly told them "Lazarus is dead" (John 11:14). Then Jesus hastened to reassure Martha: "*Your brother will rise again*" (John 11:23). Jesus plainly describes death as "sleep." He also parallels resurrection from which the dead will awaken from sleep at the sound of His voice. Lazarus' condition in death was similar to a sleep from which one awakens. Christ said: "I go to awake him out of sleep" (John 11:11). The Lord carried out His promise by going to the tomb and calling:

"*Lazarus, come out.*" And the dead man came out" (**John 11:43-44**).

The awakening of Lazarus out of the sleep of death by the sound of Christ's voice parallels the awakening of the sleeping saints on the day of His glorious coming. They, too, shall hear the voice of Christ and come forth to Him, too, shall hear the voice of Christ and come forth to life again. "*The hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth*" (**John 5:28**; cf. **John 5:25**).

Questions about the Resurrection Answered

What kind of body will Christ give at His return to the sleeping and living saints? We are rather fortunate to have Paul's discussion of this very question which had been raised by the Corinthians:

"But someone will ask, 'How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?' You foolish man! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body which is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body" (1 Corinthians 15:35-38).

By means of analogy of the seed, Paul explains the continuity and discontinuity that exist between our present physical body and the future resurrection/translation body. The continuity is established by the connection between the seed and the new plant that sprouts out of it. The discontinuity is seen in the difference between the seed that is sown and the new plant that comes from it. What Paul is saying here is that as God gives a body to each kind of seed that is sown, so He will give a body to each person who is buried. The fact that deceased bodies are buried like the seed in the ground may have suggested to Paul the analogy of the seed.

Paul develops further the analogy of sowing and reaping to give the nearest thing to a description of the resurrection body to be found in the Bible:

"So is it with the resurrection of the dead. 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" (1 Corinthians 15:42-44).

There are four contrasts in this text between our present body and the resurrection body by means of four contrasts. These contrasts are applicable to all those transformed and/or raised at Christ's coming.

First, our present bodies are perishable (*phthora*)—subject to sickness and death—but our resurrection bodies will be imperishable (*aphtharsia*) — no longer liable to sickness and death.

Second, our present bodies experience the dishonor of being lowered into a grave, but our resurrection bodies will experience the glory of an inner and outward transformation.

Third, our present bodies are weak, as they easily become tired and exhausted, but our resurrection bodies will be full of power with boundless energy to accomplish all our goals.

Fourth, our present bodies are physical (*soma psychikon*), but our resurrection bodies will be spiritual (*soma pneumatikon*). This means that everything about life - eating, fellowship, working, playing, friendships, etc... will be 'spirit-led.'

In this the same epistle: "The unspiritual (lit. *psychikos*; sometimes translated 'natural' or 'physical' or 'fleshly') man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually (*pneumatikos*) discerned (1 Corinthians 2:14-15).

In that day of Resurrection, we will live guided, controlled, and led by the Spirit in all things (for a full reading of this classic work on the resurrection, see Samuele Bacchiocchi's *Immortality or Resurrection*).