

## Resurrection of the Body – Part 4 (1 Corinthians 15:50-58)

Expository Lessons from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians

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### I. Introduction and Review

- a. This is part 4 of the teaching in **1 Corinthians 15** regarding the resurrection of the body.
- b. This will build on the foundation we laid in the first three parts. To recap:
  - i. While many Christians today believe that only our soul is saved, in the beginning, Christians understood that God's plan is to save both our body and soul together.
  - ii. The teaching on the physical resurrection of the body was historically considered a foundational teaching of the Christian faith.
    1. It is one of the six things listed among the "elementary principles of Christ" in **Hebrews 6:1-3**.
    2. It is included in the Apostles Creed, an early statement of faith. If a believer did not assent to belief in the resurrection of the body, he or she would not be considered ready for baptism.
    3. Early Christian writer Tertullian, writing c. 210 AD, asserted that someone who denied the resurrection of the flesh *could hardly be considered a Christian!*
      - a. "...if the resurrection of the flesh be denied, that prime article of the faith is shaken..."
      - b. "...He, therefore, will not be a Christian who shall deny this doctrine which is confessed by Christians..."
        - i. (Source: Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, chapters 2-3; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 3, p. 547)
    4. However, while Tertullian considered belief in the resurrection of the body to be a foundational Christian belief, he also acknowledged that from the beginning of the church, there have always been those who have denied it!
      - a. "Touching the resurrection of the dead, let us first inquire how some persons then [*referring to 1*

*Corinthians 15]* denied it. No doubt in the same way in which it is even now denied, *since the resurrection of the flesh has at all times men to deny it.*"

- i. (Source: Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, book 5, chapter 9; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 3, p. 447)
  - 5. While the resurrection of the body is mentioned throughout the New Testament, the teaching is most fully explained in **1 Corinthians 15**.
- iii. Paul taught that each of us consists of three parts: the body, soul and spirit. (**1 Thessalonians 5:23**)
  - 1. Early Christians saw the soul as pulled in one direction (upward) by our God-given human *spirit*, while being pulled in the opposite direction by our *carnal flesh*.
- iv. The teaching about the resurrection of the body was controversial among the Jews. Although the Pharisees believed in it, the Sadducees did not (**Acts 23:8**). In the prior message, we discussed several Old Testament passages that support the belief in the resurrection of the dead.
- v. Paul addressed how the bodies of the dead could be raised. We also considered quotes from early Christian writers defending the idea that this would happen.
  - 1. Early Christians held that God could, and would, restore and reconstitute the bodies of the dead, regardless of what happened to them (eaten by animals or fish, burned and scattered as ashes and vapor, dismembered, etc.)

## II. When Will the Resurrection Will Take Place?

- a. Read **1 Corinthians 15:50-53**.
- a. When the resurrection of all the dead will happen: at the Second Coming of Christ.
  - i. The resurrection of all the dead and the transformation of their bodies will happen for all "at the last trumpet".
    - 1. Tertullian, writing c. 207 AD, commented on this statement by Paul:
      - a. "The resurrection is first, and afterwards the kingdom. We say, therefore, that the flesh rises again. We say that

when it has changed, it obtains the kingdom. 'For the dead will be raised incorruptible' ... and 'we will be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye.' (**1 Corinthians 15:52**)”

- i. (Above quote from Dictionary of *Early Christian Beliefs*, ed. David Bercot, entry on 'Resurrection of the Dead', pp. 559-564. Original source: Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, book 5, chapter 10, found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 3, p. 451)
  - ii. The terms “kingdom of God” and “kingdom of heaven” are used in some places in Scripture to describe the current phase of the kingdom, which we can now be a part of (as in **Colossians 1:13**). However, the same terms are also used to describe the future, and more complete, manifestation of the kingdom of God upon Christ’s return (as in **Matthew 6:10, 13:41-43** and **16:28**). In the quote above, Tertullian is using the term “kingdom” in the second sense.
- ii. This reference to “the last trumpet” points to the events directly associated with the Second Coming of Christ.
    1. Shortly before His death, it appears that Jesus is answering two questions posed by his disciples. The first question was regarding the destruction of Jerusalem, and the second pertained to the end. Addressing the time of the end, Jesus explained to them what it would be like.
      - a. “For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. For *wherever the carcass is, there the eagles will be gathered* together. Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. *Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven*, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.” (**Matthew 24:27-31**, NKJV)

2. John Chrysostom spoke about this passage in a sermon he preached on the text of **Matthew 24:16-31**.
  - a. "...But He mentions also another sign, 'where the carcass is, there also shall the eagles be;' meaning the multitude of the angels, of the martyrs, of all the saints.
  - b. "...But how does He come? The very creation being then transfigured, for 'the sun shall be darkened,' not destroyed, but overcome by the light of His presence; and the stars shall fall, for what shall be the need of them thenceforth, there being no night? and 'the powers of Heaven shall be shaken,' and in all likelihood, seeing so great a change come to pass. For if when the stars were made, they trembled and marveled ('for when the stars were made, all angels,' it is said, 'praised Me with a loud voice'); much more seeing all things in course of change, and their fellow servants giving account, and the whole world standing by that awful judgment-seat, and those who have lived from Adam unto His coming, having an account demanded of them of all that they did, how shall they but tremble, and be shaken?
  - c. "'Then shall appear the sign of the Son of Man in Heaven;' that is, the cross being brighter than the sun, since this last will be darkened, and hide himself, and that will appear when it would not appear, unless it were far brighter than the beams of the sun. But wherefore does the sign appear? In order that the shamelessness of the Jews may be more abundantly silenced. For having the cross as the greatest plea, Christ thus comes to that judgment-seat, showing not His wounds only, but also the death of reproach. "Then shall the tribes mourn,' for there shall be no need of an accusation, when they see the cross; and they shall mourn, that by His death they are nothing benefited; because they crucified Him whom they ought to have adored."
    - i. (Source: John Chrysostom, *Homily No. 76 on Matthew*)
    - ii. Chrysostom explains the statement by Jesus, "wherever the carcass is, there the eagles will be gathered together" (**Matthew 24:28**). The "carcass" in this analogy refers to the body of

Jesus, and the “eagles” refer to the angels and saints gathered together near him.

- iii. Chrysostom gives an interesting explanation of Jesus’ statement, “the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven...” (**Matthew 24:30**). He says the sign of Jesus is *the cross*. Therefore, as he understands the passage, the form of the cross will appear in the heavens at the return of Jesus.
- ii. This event (the Second Coming of Christ) is briefly mentioned in the opening of the **Book of Revelation**.
  - 1. “Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him, even they who pierced Him. And all the tribes of the earth will mourn because of Him. Even so, Amen.” (**Revelation 1:7**, NKJV)
- iii. Paul also spoke about this event in his other letters.
  - 1. Read **1 Thessalonians 4:13-18** (or even better, read all the way to **5:11**).
  - 2. This is what we can look forward to. Although many prophecies have been fulfilled, there are a few important things we are still waiting for!
    - a. He speaks of those who “sleep” (here as elsewhere in the Scriptures, this word is used as metaphor for death) will arise.
    - b. Those who “sleep in Jesus” will rise just as He did, and they will be brought with Him.
    - c. This event will be marked by:
      - i. Christ descending from heaven;
      - ii. A shout, the voice of an archangel;
      - iii. The sounding of the “trumpet of God”; and
      - iv. *Dead in Christ will rise first*, then those still alive will be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air, to be with Him forever.
    - d. It will happen suddenly, catching many by surprise, as a “thief in the night” (**1 Thessalonians 5:2**).

- iv. There are many aspects of what happens at the end that I have questions about, which (fortunately) are beyond the scope of this series of lessons. The point made here by Paul is that the resurrection will happen suddenly, and in the future at the return of Christ. It could come at any time, and we must always be ready. While these things seem clear to me, there are other questions about what happens at the end that are not so clear to me. For example:
  - 1. A first and second resurrection are alluded to in **Revelation**.
  - 2. What happens to the earth, and whether we will spend a period of time here (a 1,000 year 'millennial' reign) versus in heaven.
  - 3. The role of the antichrist coming and the chronology of other events surrounding the end.
- b. One statement by Paul in this passage has confused many over the centuries: "Flesh and blood will not inherit the kingdom of God." (**1 Corinthians 15:50**)
  - i. From the earliest days of the church, this passage has been taken out of context by those who deny the bodily resurrection. Jesus addresses this directly, as did the early Christians, including Irenaeus and Tertullian.
  - ii. Jesus stated after His resurrection that His resurrected body had flesh.
    - 4. Jesus said to the apostles, after His resurrection: "Behold My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself. Handle Me and see, for a spirit does not have *flesh and bones* as you see I have." (**Luke 24:39**, NKJV)
    - 5. **Questions:** Does this statement by Paul that "flesh and blood is not able to inherit the kingdom" imply that *Jesus* did not inherit the kingdom?
      - a. **Answer:** Of course not! And Paul just said that we will be like Jesus after we are raised incorruptible.
  - iii. Also, consider the following statement from Irenaeus, writing c. 180 AD:
    - 6. "'Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God.' (**1 Corinthians 15:50**) This is put forward by all the heretics in support of their folly [i.e., their denial of the resurrection of the body]. They do this to try to annoy us and to point out that the handiwork of God [i.e., the flesh] is not saved.... However, by

‘flesh and blood,’ Paul refers to all of those (as many as there are) who do not have that [Spirit] which saves and forms us into life. These are the ones who do not have the Spirit of God in themselves. For that reason, men of this mold are spoken of by the Lord as ‘dead.’ For He says, ‘Let the dead bury their dead.’ (**Matthew 8:22**)”

- a. (Above quote from *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, ed. David Bercot, on ‘Resurrection of the Dead’, pp. 559-564. Original source: Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, book 5, chapter 9; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, pp. 534-535)
- b. The point Irenaeus is making here is that the term “flesh” or “flesh and blood” is used in more than one way in the Scriptures. Similarly to the way the term “dead” had more than one meaning in the statement by Jesus, “let the *dead* bury their *dead*” (**Matthew 8:22**).
- c. For example, consider how Paul uses the term “flesh” in **Romans 7-8**.
  - i. “So then, those who are *in the flesh* cannot please God. But *you are not in the flesh* but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His.” (**Romans 8:8-9**, NKJV)
- d. Similarly, the term “flesh,” as used by Paul in **1 Corinthians 15:50**, could be referring to our current, corruptible flesh (which will be transformed and replaced with incorruptible), or it could refer to our fleshly, carnal nature.
  - i. Either way, Paul, in this one verse, was not invalidating everything else he taught in this chapter of **1 Corinthians** about the resurrection of the dead!
- iv. Note: Early Christian writer Tertullian also discussed at length the misuse of this phrase, “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God”, and how we should understand Paul’s statement. For more on this see the following, both found in Ante-Nicene Fathers volume 3:
  1. Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, book 5, chapters 10-14
  2. Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, chapters 48-51.

### III. Death will be Defeated in the End

#### a. Read **1 Corinthians 15:54-58**.

- i. Here, Paul is using a rhetorical device to treat Death as a person and then to 'trash-talk' Death, taunting it as a fighter or other athlete might taunt his opponent before entering a match.
  1. "O Death, where is your sting?" (drawing from **Isaiah 25:8**)
  2. "O Hades, where is your victory?" (drawing from **Hosea 13:14**)
- ii. Death will be defeated in the end, in fulfillment of prophecies in **Isaiah** and **Hosea**.
  1. Also, as previously discussed by Paul in **1 Corinthians 15:26-27**, this is in fulfillment of **Psalms 8** and **109/110** which speak of all his enemies (the last of which is death) coming under His feet.
  2. In **Revelation 20:13-14** it speaks of Death and Hades being emptied, and then both of them being cast into the lake of fire.
  3. In **Revelation 1:18** Jesus proclaimed that He *holds the keys of Death and Hades*, indicating his authority over them.
  4. Jesus has conquered death, the enemy of mankind.
- iii. Most people try to avoid thinking about death. They act almost as if they think they will never die. Do they foolishly believe that if they avoid thinking about it, it won't happen?
  1. Young and healthy people especially don't think about death very often.
    - a. Many people don't prepare wills and don't make arrangements regarding funeral/burial or for those they will leave behind.
  2. Those who do think about death more than most:
    - a. Those who are now older and clearly in the last stages of life. Those in or approaching retirement.
    - b. Those in certain professions (estate planners, those working with the very ill).
    - c. Those facing serious illness, or who have loved ones who are facing life-threatening illnesses.



- d. All of us when we attend funerals of friends or relatives.
  - e. The more philosophical, reflective (or even morose) among us.
    - i. Examples that come to mind: my wife Alison (even in her youth) and my grandson Elijah, an unusual child who, even at the age of four, was seriously concerned about death.
- iv. Read **Ecclesiastes 7:1-4**. (p. 876)
1. The author of **Ecclesiastes** is seeking the meaning of life. He throws himself into all the same things people do today (wealth, knowledge, fame, pleasure, accomplishments, etc.) but comes up empty when he considers that it all will end in death. (**Ecclesiastes 1-3**)
  2. For that reason, he concludes it is better to go to the house of mourning (a funeral) than to the house of drinking, feasting and partying. He makes the point that in the house of mourning, at least the wise can reflect on their own end and take that to heart!
- v. There is an interesting extended discussion about *Death* in **Wisdom of Solomon 1-3**.
1. Read **Wisdom of Solomon 1:12-16**. (p. 894)
    - a. God did not make death.
      - i. Let us not make the mistake of *blaming God* when someone dies.
    - b. God created all things that they might exist. In the beginning, when God created the world, there was no death in it.
      - i. He wanted everything He created, which was good, to be preserved.
  2. The ungodly look at death, and the fact that no one had returned, and conclude they should just live for pleasure. They become self-centered and unrighteous. They resent the righteous. (**Wisdom of Solomon 2:1-22**)
  3. Read **Wisdom of Solomon 2:23-3:9**.

- a. Satan, as a result of his envy, is the one who brought death into the world.
  - b. The righteous will live forever. They will rest now, but live and rule in the future.
  - c. The righteous should not expect an easy life. It says that God will test them with trials, as gold being *refined in a furnace*.
- vi. It was *Satan* who introduced death into the world. It did not come from God. Jesus' mission is to destroy Satan and to destroy death which the devil brought into the world. In the end, the grave will be emptied and have nothing. Jesus will triumph over all of His enemies in the end, death being the last one to fall.
- 1. "Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might *destroy him who had the power of death*, that is, the devil," (**Hebrews 2:14**, NKJV)
  - 2. "Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner, but share with me in the sufferings for the gospel according to the power of God, who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began, but has now been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ, *who has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel*," (**2 Timothy 1:8-10**, NKJV)

#### IV. Closing Thoughts About the Resurrection of the Dead

- a. This is a foundational teaching of the Christian faith that is widely misunderstood today.
  - i. The doctrine of the resurrection of the dead is one of the six "elementary principles" of the Christian faith, according to **Hebrews 6:1-3**.
  - ii. It is all over the New Testament and can be seen in the Old Testament as well. It is so basic that it is included in the basic statement of faith (the Apostles Creed) that someone would confess at their baptism.
  - iii. We have restored the practice of explaining that teaching to those who are candidates for baptism.

- b. This teaching is rooted and embodied in the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Himself. Those who follow Him can expect the same pattern. He is the firstborn from among the dead.
- c. Man is composed of body, soul and spirit. God's plan is to save all three components of man. The grave will have nothing, in the end.
- d. Our bodies do matter, in the spiritual realm. The Christian faith is not limited to merely our soul, spirits and thoughts.
  - i. In conversion, our bodies are involved. It is not just a matter of believing in our hearts or saying a prayer.
    - 1. "...let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and *our bodies washed with pure water.*" (**Hebrews 10:22**, NKJV)
    - 2. "And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes *and is baptized* will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned." (**Mark 16:15-16**, NKJV)
    - 3. "...not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit," (**Titus 3:5**, NKJV)
  - ii. This is why the Lord's Supper is so important. This is why we must "eat his body and drink his blood" to become part of the kingdom, or we have "no life in us". (**John 6:48-58**)
  - iii. This is why sins involving our flesh *can have worse spiritual consequences* than those involving only our heart, mind and soul.
    - 1. "Do you not know that *your bodies are members of Christ*? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a harlot? Certainly not! Or do you not know that he who is joined to a harlot is one body with her? For "the two," He says, "shall become one flesh." But he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him. Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but *he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body*. Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's." (**1 Corinthians 6:15-20**, NKJV)

- iv. Our flesh, which participated in our sin, will also participate with the soul and spirit either in eternal life, or eternal punishment.
  - 1. That is why Jesus said it was better to lose one part of our body (hand or eye) than for our entire body to be cast into the fire of Gehenna (**Matthew 5, Mark 9**)
  - 2. Our souls are being pulled in two directions. We cannot let our flesh pull us down to carnal desires. Like Paul, we must bring our bodies into subjection (**1 Corinthians 9:27**). This includes bridling our tongues (**James 1:26**).
  - 3. I am reminded of the early Christian analogy of our life as being similar to a horse and chariot. The horse (like our flesh), if unrestrained by the chariot driver, will pull the chariot (and us!) off the edge of the cliff and over the precipice! We are the chariot driver and must restrain the impulses of the flesh for its own good as well as for the good of the entire person (incorporating all three parts: body, soul, and spirit).
- e. The resurrection of the body will take place at the return of Christ, the Second Coming. All will be judged then, according to what Jesus said in **Matthew 12:41-42**.
- f. A solid belief in the resurrection of the dead can motivate us to stand strong in the face of severe persecution, regardless of whatever torture is involved. This motivated heroes of faith in the past, as we see in **Hebrews 11:32-35**.
- g. The resurrection of the body is the true hope we have in this life. As Paul said, if only for this life (and its pleasures) we have hope, we are of all men the most pitiable (**1 Corinthians 15:19**).
  - i. We do not need to fear death. Jesus conquered death for all of those who follow Him.
  - ii. This is the reminder that God can, indeed, do anything. He created the universe from nothing and can reassemble the scattered parts of our bodies.
  - iii. Abraham believed this (**Hebrews 11:17-19**), and those who are his spiritual offspring still do.
- h. **Challenge for Us:** Embrace this foundational teaching and its implications, and strive to be equipped to explain it to others.
- i. **Closing Charge from Paul:**

- i. “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.” (**1 Corinthians 15:58**, NKJV)
- ii. May this understanding motivate us to work hard in the Lord, and to stand with an unshakeable faith regardless of what comes in this life!