

# STAND FIRM IN THE RESURRECTION HOPE (3)

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This is my third study in a series on relevant portions of 1 Corinthians 15, which ancient Gnostics, modern liberals, and contemporary hyper-preterists believe support their attack on historic Christianity. They believe certain verses in this chapter undermine the historic doctrine of a future, physical, fleshly resurrection of the dead. And admittedly, upon a surface reading, we can see how they could be confused by a few of Paul's statements herein.

However, despite the surface appearance of some of Paul's language (e.g., "*spiritual body*," Christ as "*life-giving spirit*," "*flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God*," etc.), Christian orthodoxy has long held to the physical resurrection of the dead as a future, corporate eschatological event occurring at the end of history at the final judgment. And Orthodox Christians have long been aware that Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians has been in the New Testament from very early in Christian history. Paul wrote it around AD 54, just 20+ years after Jesus' death (it is one of the earliest New Testament canonical writings). And yet historic Christianity has still maintained the physical nature of our future resurrection.

## The Foundation of Paul's Argument

The debate over the nature of our resurrection bodies should be quickly resolved by simply reading Paul's opening comments in 1 Corinthians 15:1–23. These words demonstrate that resurrection is truly a physical reality involving the revivification of the deceased body made of flesh. These opening words focus on the reality of Jesus' own physical, fleshly resurrection from the dead (e.g., Luke 24:39; John 20:1–12, 20, 27; Acts 2:26, 31). And according to Paul, that event was rooted in Scripture itself (v. 4) and historically attested by human witnesses (vv. 5–8). And he also informs us of its linkage to our own resurrection, so that Jesus' resurrection functions as the first fruits of ours (vv. 20, 23).

Most significantly, Paul declares that Jesus' physical resurrection serves as the very heart of the gospel of our salvation (vv. 1–4). This is why reinterpreting the resurrection (of Jesus—and ourselves) leads into heretical territory.

Paul uses his opening words in 1 Corinthians 15 to discuss Jesus' past bodily resurrection. He does this to lay the foundation for his sustained argument regarding our future bodily resurrection. Significantly, the believer's resurrection is actually his main topic in this large chapter. We see this not only from the space he affords the matter (see vv. 13–54), but also because he is answering the specific questions held by some of the Corinthians (v. 35).

Paul presents these questions as designed by his opponents to dismiss and even to mock (!) the very idea of the resurrection. For after all of his previous lengthy,

detailed discussion of Christ's resurrection, its importance to salvation, and the proofs of its having occurred, Paul then introduces their questions with the strong adversative (*Gk., alla*). Thus, his opponents strongly rejected the very possibility of resurrection, leading him to respond immediately with, "*You fool!*"

So, Jesus' own resurrection serves as the foundation of his rebuttal to the proto-Gnostic problem at Corinth. From this chapter and verses elsewhere, we know Jesus' resurrection was a physical reality (e.g., Luke 24:38–39; John 20:19–20, 25, 27). In fact, early on in his ministry, Jesus openly declared, "*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up,*" which was a reference to his currently inhabited body ("*this temple*") dying and ("*it*") rising again (John 2:19–21).

So then, having opened thusly, Paul immediately brings the reality of Jesus' resurrection to bear on the question of the believer's resurrection. In fact, the heart of his concern in this lengthy chapter is to answer the proto-Gnostics' two questions in v. 35. Let us see how Paul answers the problem presented by his opponents. I will begin by first considering:

### **The Structure of 1 Cor. 15:36–54**

Professor James Ware has presented us with a valuable analysis of the structure of this section of Paul's epistle. [1] He shows the implications of the literary framework of Paul's argument for our physical resurrection. I will be following his lead, which is a great example of careful, sound exegetical analysis. (The only problem with his argument is he happens to believe what historic Christianity has always believed, which makes him suspect and renders him naive to some novel theologians roaming the Internet.)

Paul engages the matter before him by carefully structuring his answer for maximum impact. In the first part of his argument (vv. 36–49), he pairs opposing verbs that refer to death and to resurrection. Then in the second part, he drops the paired negative and positive verbs and begins using seven verbs speaking of resurrection/transformation (vv. 50–54).

In the first part of his response, he employs these twelve verbs presented in six pairs:

apothane ("dies") / zoopoieitai ("made alive") (v. 36)  
speiretai ("sown") / egeiretai ("raised") (v. 42)  
speiretai ("sown") / egeiretai ("raised") (v. 43a)  
speiretai ("sown") / egeiretai ("raised") (v. 43b)  
speiretai ("sown") / egeiretai ("raised") (v. 44)  
ephoresamen ("we bore") / phoresomen ("we shall bear"), v. 49

These paired verbs present a series of contrasting results, distinguishing the believer's present earthly body from his future risen body:

"dies" / "made alive" (v. 36)  
"perishable" / "imperishable" (v. 42)

“dishonor” / “glory” (v. 43a)  
“weakness” / “power” (v. 43b)  
“natural body” / “spiritual body” (v. 44)  
“earthly” / “heavenly” (v. 49)

Then after this back-and-forth with paired opposing verbs, things change at v. 50. Verse 50 warns that *“flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.”* Then his stylistic change of approach is presented in verses 51ff.

So now at this point Paul begins using only verbs that speak of our glorious resurrection or transformation (vv. 50–54). Those verbs are *allagsometha* (“we shall be changed”) (vv. 51 and 52); *egerthsontai* (“shall be raised”) (v. 52); *endusasthai* (“shall put on”) (vv. 53–54; 4x).

By doing this, Paul forms a literary inclusio, which brackets the whole section. That is, he presents the substantives (i.e., nouns or noun phrases) of verses 53–54 (phtarton [“perishable”]/aphtharsian [“imperishable”]; theton [“mortal”]/aphtharsian [“immortal”]) to echo the verb pairs in verse 42 (“sown a perishable body”/“raised an imperishable body”).

Not only so, but we must note that the first substantive pair (“perishable/imperishable,” vv. 53–54) matches the first verbal pair (“perishable/imperishable,” v. 42). This is not accidental; this is strategic. Paul is drawing our attention to his goal of exalting our physical resurrection glory. Significantly, the final substantive pair (athanasia, “immortality,” 2x in v. 54a) opens the door, leading to his grand conclusion—that “death is swallowed up in victory” (v. 54b).

All of this underscores the fact that our natural, fallen, weak, flesh-and-blood bodies cannot just walk into eternity. They must be transformed by divine action—at the resurrection. And Paul is describing that transformation that makes our “raised” (v. 52) physical bodies imperishable and immortal (vv. 53–54).

So now we must observe that the opposing verb pairs in vv. 36–49 involve the very same body (“self-same” body, as the Westminster divines put it) in both parts of the opposing conditions. That which dies (the body) is made alive. That which is sown in mortality (the body) is raised in immortality. This transformation to immortality involves a fundamental continuity of bodily substance.

There is more for us to consider. See you next time.

## Notes

1. James Ware, *the Final Triumph of God*; see also David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians* (BECNT).