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Encouraging the Believers

It is not long before Easter will be upon us.

To many the very notion of a resurrection seems ridiculous. To think that a decomposed body – or perhaps even more, a cremated body – could be reconstituted from the chemicals in the ground seems bizarre.

Of course, it's not a new objection. There's a pre-Raphaelite painting which depicts a woman grieving at the death of her lover. She's at a graveyard kneeling with her tombstone in front of her, on which are inscribed those words from the prophet Ezekiel, "can these bones live?" She clearly doesn't think so – on her face is a look of scorn and derision.

That summarises the attitude of many. How could such a thing happen? How can God turn some nutrients in the ground into a living person?

Of course this isn't some merely theoretical question, for if one day there will be a resurrection, we need to be ready for that day, and to help other people prepare for it.

So what will happen on this great day of resurrection in the future?

1. Our bodies will be changed!

Paul begins by pouring scorn on those who think a resurrection cannot happen. 1 Corinthians 15 vs 35 - How foolish he says! What godless stupidity!

Even in the world around we see bodies changing. Take plant life, for example. To be a full plant a seed must first die.

Vs 36-38 - The seed body changes. The body that emerges as a plant in the summer is very different to that seed which was planted in the winter. We know that bodies can be changed in this sphere, and therefore it shouldn't surprise us that a dead person can be changed.

Moreover we already see that bodies can vary. Just because we have a particular form now doesn't mean that God can't give us a body that is of a different kind in the new creation. After all he already gives many different kinds of bodies to things now. Vs 39-41.

From the ant to the giraffe, from the shark to the earwig – God is not just in the business of making

different kinds of bodies – he's an expert at it. So when I say that our resurrection body will not be exactly like our earthly body that shouldn't perplex you, Paul is saying; God is more than capable of bringing them into being.

More than that it is incredibly arrogant to doubt God's capability on this score - to ask scornfully "how are they raised?" – as if God can't do such a thing. Will God struggle to give us a resurrection body when the time is right? Of course not. The fact we may have been cremated is hardly an obstacle to the one who invented and made us in the first place!

All that is clear is that our resurrection bodies will be somewhat different to how they are now. In fact these verses – they're incredibly exciting! Vs 42-44.

We are sown perishable: we are all decaying people. But we will be raised imperishable. There will be no decay of the faculties. Not prone or subject to accidents, age has no effect, no loss of vigour.

We are sown in dishonour – so prone to sin. But will be raised in glory – to be the people we should be.

We are sown in weakness – limitations of strength, of sight, of hearing. But we will be raised indestructible power.

We are sown a natural body, raised spiritual. Natural in sense of limited to this world, whereas spiritual will be suitable for eternity.

It is incredible what we're going to get. So we are not to feel sorry for Christians who have died. One day we will be given bodies to die for. And we must resist the temptation to envy people in this life who don't have this hope. We look at Brad or Angelina, or Naomi Campbell or Sharapova, but no amount of surgery can keep holding them together forever. We have the certain hope of a changed body.

2. Our bodies will be heavenly!

Here Paul reinforces his argument, showing that Christians are descended from 2 different ancestors.

Because we have two different ancestors, we can have two different bodies, one here now and one in the life to come. Our earthly body takes the character for our earthly ancestor,

and our heavenly body will take character for heavenly ancestor.

Our earthly ancestor is Adam, from which every member of the human race descends. Our second ancestor is Christ; every Christian, while descended from Adam is also descended from Christ. That first Adam, vs 45 - was a living being i.e. he had a human body. The last Adam, while he did have a human body, then became a life giving spiritual man when he rose from the dead to receive his heavenly body.

You remember how Jesus was physical after his resurrection from the dead; he ate - but his body also had a different quality - he could walk through doors for example. He wasn't limited in the same way.

Well, says Paul, we will follow this same order. Vs 46-48 - We're earthly now, but we will be turned into heavenly then. That's how God wants us. All we have to do to gain this heavenly body is to die - and most of us are capable of doing that!

So just because we're stuck with how we are at the moment shouldn't for a second lead us to conclude that this is how we will always be. The plan is on track. We're already half way there. To some it seems incredulous. But it shouldn't. For we already have half of it now, and God himself has promised the second half. We will have a body come from heaven.

When children are growing up people often observe that they change in who they appear to look most like. One year they most closely resemble their mother. The next it is they are a spitting image of their father.

A similar change may be observed with the Christian; at the moment we look all too like our earthly parent Adam; but one day they will say of us 'Look at him - just like his father from heaven.'

Our bodies will be heavenly like his.

3. Our bodies will be imperishable!

In vs 50 Paul states that we cannot enter heaven in these bodies.

Some places you have to be dressed rightly to enter. Some upmarket private clubs require a tie to come in. The Kingdom of God also has an entry requirement - that all who enter have imperishable bodies.

Therefore a change will take place. Vs 51-53. On that day a megaphonic trumpet will sound which none will sleep through. In a flash, with the twinkling of an eye we'll be changed - clothed with immortality. This is hardly purgatory! But rather is immediate - and we will find our new bodies will have been given to us. The jetlag between our souls and our bodies will have caught up.

Then we will be victorious over death, as we are given our new bodies. Vs 54-57.

The reason sin is the sting of death is that death poisons us to capture us with sin and then holds us condemned under God's good new law. But by taking our sin and the curse attached to it - the Lord Jesus Christ has freed us from it. Death is discarded - it's like a plastic bag on the beach.

How wonderful. Our resurrection bodies will be imperishable. Death will have no hold over them. In vs 55 Paul has such confidence he mocks death. It has no power over us.

Here is our hope. And what a hope it is. I first heard this passage preached by a young man who suffered with muscular dystrophy - where every movement is exercise in pain. He took what seemed like a full minute to walk down the church and haul himself into the pulpit. And so he began to preach on the new body. He didn't need to say a word about himself - the joy was written all over his face.

And joy can be written all over our face too. One day it'll be our turn. We'll swap our tired, fading, half-working bodies for something new, powerful, eternal. It is a certain hope of a physical resurrection of the dead.

In the light of which: vs 58 - We must stand firm. Stand firm in the confidence we have in what is to come. Be like that rock you sometimes see out beyond the coast - where everything else may have in time been eroded by the crashing sea that continually hammers it, but that rock stands out.

That needs to be you, O Christian man or woman. Whatever crashes against you now or in the years to come. Stand firm.

Sometimes we will feel battered. Battered by criticism of those around, Christian or non-Christian, assaulted by the world, the flesh and the devil, hammered by the discouragement of our own sinfulness. But through it all we must stand firm.

Then secondly, says Paul, always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord because we know that our labour for the Lord is not in vain. Labour in the Lord is the gospel ministry of aiding the teaching about the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Everything else we do in this world is 'of vanity' - transient, temporary and of limited use. But the work we do in enabling Christ to be known has a permanent, eternal effect.

So we must enthusiastically recommit ourselves to this work, knowing that however it seems at the time - slow, unimpressive and with limited fruit - it is actually a work that the return of Christ will reveal to be incomparably glorious and physically everlasting. Praise be to God!