

Series Apostles' Creed

This Message I Believe in the Resurrection of the Body #13

Scripture I Corinthians 15:1-8, 11; 15:35-44

One of the characteristics of the Apostles' Creed is the positive direct way it states very deep truths about the Triune God. The Creed is all about God, who He is and what He has done. God surprised the human race by the unique way He Himself made atonement for the sins of people, justifying people because they could not redeem themselves. The facts about God and His actions are straightforward and clear, but because they are so far beyond the ways of human thinking, it is impossible for individuals to grasp their significance unless God, in His mercy, sovereignly reveals His truth and draws people to Himself.

Non-believers, and especially those who are identified as the enemies of God, feel obligated to challenge the statements of the Creed. To them, some of the statements are absurd, without rational basis, something on the order of fanciful thinking. One of the greatest challenges to the truth of Scripture concerns the resurrection Of Jesus. The resurrection, along with the virgin birth, was a supernatural happening, and anything deemed supernatural, that is, outside the realm of human experience, is considered to be unacceptable for modern, sophisticated thinkers.

On the other hand, individuals who accept the miraculous power of God, readily accept the accounts of Jesus' resurrection in the New Testament. For believers, the evidence of God's power is their basis of faith. They view the resurrection of Jesus as the supreme display of God's power. It was the act by which the power and fear of death, which had overwhelmed humanity throughout history, was broken. It was the act by which people were given hope for life beyond the grave. Through Jesus, God opened the way for people to get beyond physical death to the boundless and blissful condition of eternal life.

The resurrection had to be an essential part of God's plan for the redemption of mankind for a very simple reason: if Christ had not been raised, there would have been no certainty on the part of humans that his death had effected anything. Jesus' death satisfied the justice of the Father, but the meaning of the crucifixion was hidden from the understanding of people. What people needed was evidence that God was offering redemption through Jesus, and the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus was the public vindication of His mission on earth. We can have confidence in the redemption provided to us by God because Jesus is our proof that the power of death has been broken.

There had to be witnesses to the resurrection. The reports about the resurrection had to be credible. Fortunately Jesus made numerous appearances after His resurrection and there were no doubts among His followers that He was supernaturally alive. There was a forty day period of time between the resurrection and ascension of Jesus into heaven. Many of His followers saw and interacted with Jesus during those days. The introduction to the book of Acts sums up these appearances with these words: "To them (the apostles) he presented himself after his passion by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days, and speaking of the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3).

The Apostle Paul also described the meetings between Jesus and His followers.

Read I Corinthians 15:1-11 (exclude verses 9-10)

In these verses Paul explained the emphasis of his preaching. The emphasis was on the appearances of Jesus after His death and burial. Notice how many times the words "he appeared" occur (in verses 5, 6, 7, 8). These appearances confirmed that Jesus was indeed alive. They authenticated the historicity of the resurrection. The apostles had seen Jesus expire on the cross, knew where His grave was located, were convinced of the reality of His death. And then, in surprise and joy, three days after His burial, they began to experience the reality of the new life of Jesus.

The followers of Jesus recognized that He was real and really alive. There were no doubts about this among those who saw Him. And what His followers saw transformed their lives. They became fearless in proclaiming the gospel. On the Day of Pentecost, in the very first sermon preached after the birth of the Church, the Apostle Peter declared to the Jews that the One who had been crucified had been raised from the dead and that God had made Him both Lord and Christ.

This message became the core of the Good News proclaimed by first century believers. Throughout the book of Acts, which is the history of the early Church, there are numerous references to the death and resurrection of Jesus. *[For examples see Acts 3:13-15, 26; 4:2, 10, 33; 5:30-33; 10:39-41; 13:37; 17:31; 25:19]*. The leaders of the early Church accepted as fact the supernatural display of power which brought Jesus back from the dead and restored to Him the glory He originally had with the Father. This fact was proclaimed to lots of people, but not everyone who heard the Good News responded with eagerness. For the most part, individuals received the information about the resurrection with skepticism. Not only were people skeptical about supernatural resurrection, they were specifically skeptical about the resurrection of bodies. Why?

The Greek philosophers of the first century held the opinion that the soul was immortal and eternal, but that the body was merely the temporal “container” for the soul. They thought that the body could be discarded after death, and that the soul would be set free. This idea persists to the present time.

The Scriptures present a much different idea, that the soul and body are not separate and distinct parts of a person. There is a verse in one of Paul’s letters which describes the believer as “spirit, soul, and body” *(1 Thessalonians 5:23)*. We cannot be complete persons if any part is missing. The Scriptures indicate that our redemption includes the body, and that redemption will not be complete until the body itself is resurrected from death.

For the Greek philosophers, redemption was doing away with the body; the New Testament teaches that redemption includes the body. The statement, “the resurrection of the body,” was inserted into the Creed to counter the Greek philosophy and to affirm the truth of the redemption of both soul and body.

The Scriptures do not give us a detailed explanation of how this redemption will happen. However, there are some good clues that help us to understand. For example, the Apostle John wrote: “Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he (Jesus) appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” *(1 John 3:2)*. Paul announced to the readers in Philippi that God “will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” *(Philippians 3:21)*. Paul also wrote: “Just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven” *(1 Corinthians 15:49)*.

The best way to imagine the characteristics of our future resurrection body is to consider the resurrected body of Jesus. The disciples easily recognized him, He bore on his body the marks of His suffering, He could handle material objects, and He ate and drank with them, yet He was no longer subject to the physical limitations generally associated with bodily existence.

As John said, “what we will be has not yet been made known.” We don’t know how this will happen, but believers do have the expectation that their bodies will be raised from the dead, and that the resurrected body of Jesus is the paradigm for the kind of body that believers will be given in the future.

Paul wrote extensively about resurrection in a special chapter of the New Testament. I Corinthians chapter 15 is known as the resurrection chapter. In this chapter he described the resurrection body as best as he could.

Read I Corinthians 15:35-44

Paul often anticipated the questions that his readers, in particular his skeptical readers, would ask, so in rhetorical fashion he asked, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?” Paul can only give illustrations when explaining the characteristics of the resurrection body. He points out that in the earthly realm, there are various kinds of plants, animals, and celestial and terrestrial bodies.

Paul makes several comparisons. First, he points out that there is a difference between the seed which is put into the ground and the fruit which will be harvested from the mature plant at a future time. The seed is an excellent illustration of death and resurrection. A seed is buried and it dies; then through some process that we cannot observe with our eyes, out of the deadness, new life pushes out of the soil. Eventually fruit comes forth and is harvested. If you placed the seed next to the fruit, they would look nothing alike. However, the seed contained all the elements from which the mature plant developed. You put a seed in, and what comes out is totally different and yet totally the same.

What is the point of Paul's illustration? In this life our bodies are like seeds. Small, insignificant, not very impressive. When the physical body of a believer dies, it is buried, but that burial is not the end of the story. Just like the seed, a new living glorified body will emerge, to be like the glorified body of Jesus Christ. We cannot say what the resurrection body will be like with certainty, but it will be impressive, even stupendous, as remarkable as the plant is compared to the seed.

Next Paul lumps several comparisons together. He compares the flesh of people to that of animals, birds, and fish; and he compares celestial bodies with earthly bodies; and he compares the sun against the moon and other stars.

What is the point? The point is that God can take similar physical material and organize it in different ways according to His purposes and desires. From the same basic material, God can make some objects to have greater splendor than other objects. God can do this with animate beings as well as inanimate objects. God can take the lowly material which makes up our bodies in this life and reorganize it to make a future body which will be infinitely more splendid.

The application of this passage is in verses 42-44. The resurrected body is contrasted with the mortal body in four ways: one is perishable, the other imperishable; one has dishonor, the other glory; one is weak, the other is given spiritual power; one is natural while the other is spiritual. Our physical bodies have characteristics which are described by the words "perishable, dishonor, weak, and natural." We are, today, not what we are intended to become. At the present time, in this life, we all face death; at the present time, we all deal with the ways in which people disrespect and humiliate and ignore us; at the present time, we all are weak and sick and helpless; and we are all naturally human.

Paul contrasts this body we now have with the body that God will bestow on us in the resurrection. That future body will be analogous to the earthly body, yet it will be supernaturally and qualitatively different. With such a splendid body, we will, like Jesus Christ Himself, be uniquely equipped to stand in the presence of God. We will live for eternity as whole complete persons with redeemed bodies, souls, and spirits.

How does Paul end this special resurrection chapter? He declares that, for the believer, physical death is nothing to be frightened about. He declares that there is no more “sting” in death. He tells us that we will be changed “in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable ... for the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. And when the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory’” (*I Corinthians 15:51-54*).

Paul then tacks on some words of encouragement at the end of chapter 15. He wrote, “Therefore, stand firm. Let nothing move you.” In view of the power of God to provide both resurrection life and a new body, and in view of the information provided to us in Scripture, Paul does not want believers to have doubts about their future. Even though the world is filled with philosophers with weird ideas and skeptics who proclaim their doubts about the truth of God loudly and stridently, believers are to “stand firm” in their faith. They are to allow “nothing to move” them away from their confidence in the future which has been promised to them by God. “Stand firm” in faith; “Let nothing move you.” This is good advice because physical death is not the end; it is the passageway into unimaginable glory.

Extra notes

Jesus Himself predicted on three occasions that He would rise from the dead. (See Matt 16:21 = Mark 8:31 = Luke 9:22; Matt 17:22-23 = Mark 9:31; Matt 20:19 = Mark 10:34 = Luke 18:33) In all these passages, there is the reference to “the third day,” indicating that His resurrection would occur soon after the crucifixion.

When Jesus met with His disciples after His resurrection, “He said to them, ‘This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms.’ Then He opened their minds so they could understand the Scripture. He told them: ‘This is what is written (in the Scriptures): The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day.’”