

To God Alone Be The Glory

Before becoming a pastor I spent four years in the seminary. This includes the third year during which a sem student serves in a church as an intern, a student pastor, or what we usually call “a vicar.” Toward the end of my vicar year, my overseeing-pastor went on vacation for three weeks. I was left in charge, responsible for feeding the sheep and guarding the sheep—that’s what a shepherd does.

Satan, that ferocious lion, is always prowling about, looking for someone to devour. While I was visiting the shut-ins, I discovered someone trying to steal two of the sheep. An elderly couple had been long-time members of that church, but, sad to say, they wasted many of those years by skipping church and never reading their Bible. The pastor had mentioned to me earlier in the year that it was actually a good thing these two had gotten too old to go out, because as shut-ins they were now regularly listening to audio recordings of the service and receiving Holy Communion every month. Their faith was growing now, but because of those unproductive years, they were still babies in their Bible knowledge. So they did not recognize what was happening when a very nice lady, who had knocked on their door and offered to clean their house at no charge, started bringing Bible study materials along. Soon the nice lady was showing them all kinds of Bible passages and twisting God’s Word trying to prove that God is not Triune, that Jesus was just a good man and not also true God, that

because heaven is already filled she hoped only for a good place in the paradise Jesus would set up on earth. When I challenged the teachings of the very nice cleaning lady, she said, “I want you to talk to an Elder from my church.” A meeting was arranged at the home of the shut-ins. Every time I pinned down the Elder with a Bible passage, he would wriggle out by changing the subject. Finally I focused on where his doctrine was the weakest: the resurrection of the body. I asked him, “You don’t even believe Jesus rose bodily from the dead, do you?” “No,” the Elder replied, “Jesus had a spiritual body at that time, not a physical body. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, ‘It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body.’” At this the shut-ins had had enough. They knew that the Bible teaches Jesus was raised bodily from the grave. They asked the nice cleaning lady and the Elder to leave and not come back.

Secretly I was glad the shut-ins spoke up at just that moment. I knew the Elder was twisting that passage about Jesus’ body, but I didn’t know quite how to answer him, and it shook me up. The Apostles’ Creed asserts: “I believe in the resurrection of the body.” But at that point in my life, I had not yet had to prove where the Bible teaches this doctrine. So I opened my catechism, found the Bible passages on the bodily resurrection, and studied them in their full context. I wanted to remember more quickly those passages which demonstrate that Jesus rose bodily from the dead. There was Matthew 28 which says: *8The women hurried away from the*

tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples [that Jesus was alive].⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them. “Greetings,” he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. You can’t clasp the feet of someone who doesn’t have a physical body.

Then there’s Luke 24. The disciples ³⁷were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. ³⁸[Jesus] said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? ³⁹Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.” ⁴⁰When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. ⁴¹And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, “Do you have anything here to eat?” ⁴²They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³and he took it and ate it in their presence. If Jesus didn’t have a physical body, the bite of fish would have gone into his mouth and fallen straight to the floor.

A week later Jesus “said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe’” (John 20:27).

The Bible also teaches that we will rise bodily from the dead. Consider Job 19:25-27. “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. ²⁶And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; ²⁷I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!”

Listen to this promise of Jesus in John 5:28. (Jesus was speaking about himself in the third person.) “A time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out.” What is it that goes into the grave? The body. That’s what will come out of the grave, just like Lazarus’ body came out of the grave at Jesus’ command. Jesus raised Jairus’ daughter too. It would have given Jairus very little comfort to have his twelve-year-old daughter back from the dead if she didn’t have her physical body and couldn’t hug or eat or grow up. It would have helped the widow of Nain very little to have her dead son back from his coffin if he couldn’t support his mother, because he couldn’t hold anything in his hands, and therefore he couldn’t hold a job.

These and other passages verified that I was correctly teaching God’s truth to my shut-ins, the very nice cleaning lady, and the Elder. But, I have to say, these words in our sermon text from 1 Corinthians 15 continued to dog me many years. I could not wrap my mind around them. But praise be to God who answers our prayers for understanding and wisdom. He made me wait over a decade for an answer, but he kept his promise to make things clear (see Philippians 3:15). The old adage is true: if you want to understand something, try teaching it to others. That’s what happened 18 years ago when I first studied this sermon text in depth.

The Scriptures repeatedly asserts that the resurrection to life is a bodily resurrection. Armed with that clarity, I wrestled with these verses in our sermon text. As it turns

out, all the clues for understanding these verses were right there in our English Bible. By looking closely at these words, we can LEARN ABOUT THE RESURRECTION FROM A PLANT.

Here we go. The apostle Paul writes: ³⁵*Someone may ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?"* ³⁶*How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.* In grade school we planted bean seeds at the side of a glass jar so we could watch each seed germinate, marvel at its first leaf, and watch the roots grow like stringy hair. Through the glass we watched the bean seed use itself up getting the plant started. This happens to every seed that gets planted in the ground: it dies. In nature we see this pattern: life follows death.

This was an important truth for the Corinthians to remember. Some of them were saying, "There is no resurrection from the dead." Paul already responded that if there is no resurrection, then Jesus didn't rise from the dead. And if Jesus didn't rise, we are all still responsible for our sins. Jesus, who died on the cross for our sins, definitely rose from the dead. That's why you can be sure your sins are all forgiven and you too will rise. But you know how skeptical minds work: every detail has to be explained. Some in Corinth were asking, "How can the body rise if it decays into dust?" That's why Paul is pointing to a fact they already know from nature. He's basically saying: "See, even in nature, life follows death. A living plant comes from a seed that has died."

Now compare what the seed looks like to what the plant looks like. If you had never sown a seed into the ground and watched it grow into a plant, you'd probably think a farmer was daffy for sowing seeds and hoping to get plants. If you wanted to end up with a plant, wouldn't it make more sense to sow a plant. Such thinking seems silly when you know how things really work. That's why Paul says: ³⁷*When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else.* ³⁸*But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body.* That's how you can tell one kind of seed from another, and one kind of plant from another: they all have different shapes. Paul talks about "different bodies" instead of "different shapes" because he is drawing a comparison between seeds and our bodies.

And now that we've talked about plants, we're ready to go back to bodies. Paul says: ⁴²*So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable.* 'What' is raised imperishable? It. What's 'it'? The body—the very thing that got buried. Paul says the body is 'sown' because he's keeping up the comparison between our body and a seed. The body is perishable: it rots in the grave, like a seed that was planted. But when Jesus raises us, our body will not be capable of rotting any longer. *The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable.* ⁴³*It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power.* So far, so good. Your body will rise.

Are you ready for the tough part? ⁴⁴*It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.* Now, don't get spooked. We're still talking about the same 'it,' the body. But this verse seems to be saying that a spiritual body is a different body from a natural body. Except that it's not. Paul's words are just really difficult to express in English—there aren't any English equivalents for his Greek words. In order to translate literally, I have to use some made-up words. Here we go. Talking about our body, Paul says: *“It is sown soul-ish body, it is raise spirit-ish body. If there is soul-ish body, there is also spirit-ish body.”* With these words Paul is trying to explain: “Our body will be different in heaven from what it is on earth, but it won't be a different body.”

We know this is what Paul is thinking because of what he says next: ⁴⁵*So it is written: “The first man Adam became a living being”; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit.* Again English doesn't have words that are equivalent to the Greek words. Translated literally Paul says: *So it is written: “The first man Adam became living soul.”* ‘The first Adam’ is of course Adam. When God breathed into his nostrils, he became ‘living soul.’ English wants to say ‘Adam became a living being,’ but then it's hard to see that Paul is still connecting to what he said about ‘soul-ish body’ and ‘spirit-ish body.’ Paul's point is that Adam became “of this world,” or, if we use our made up equivalent word, Adam became “soul-ish.”

Let's pick up Paul's words and continue: *“So it is written: ‘The first man Adam became living soul (soul-ish); the last Adam life-giving spirit.’”* ‘The last Adam’ is Jesus, the Son of God. Paul says Jesus became ‘life-giving spirit.’ As true God, Jesus was always spirit. He still is. But by his work as Savior, he became a-spirit-that-gives-life to us through faith. By contrasting ‘soul-ish’ with ‘spirit-ish,’ Paul is saying that Adam was of this world, but Jesus was/is of God's world. In the same way, our bodies are currently of this world (or ‘soul-ish’), but when we get to heaven our bodies will be fit for God's world (or ‘spirit-ish’). Our bodies will be different then than they are on earth right now. This meaning becomes clearer as Paul continues: ⁴⁶*The spiritual (spirit-ish) did not come first, but the natural (soul-ish), and after that the spiritual (spirit-ish).* ⁴⁷*The first man was of the dust of the earth, the second man from heaven.* ⁴⁸*As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the man from heaven, so also are those who are of heaven.* ⁴⁹*And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven.*

If you're still with me, you can see that this portion of God's Word agrees with all the other passages which teach we will rise bodily from the grave. And because Jesus washed us clean of all sin, we believers will rise bodily to eternal life. See? You can LEARN ABOUT THE RESURRECTION FROM A PLANT.