

"The Resurrection of the Body and the Life Everlasting"

1 Corinthians 15:12-26

Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor asks: How is it that 500 years ago in the West, it was almost impossible to not believe in God, but today, it's almost normal? He takes almost a thousand pages to try to answer this question. My audio book version is 42 hours long.

To make his very long story short, Taylor says this:

It's not that science beat faith. Instead, culture has evolved so that the social and intellectual conditions needed to support atheism are in place. Today, Western culture values skepticism rather than seeing it a threat.

"I believe in the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting," the Creed finally teaches us.

Today many people have a hard time believing in the resurrection of the body. Why? Because our culture is generally skeptical about the supernatural, and there's nothing more supernatural than the resurrection and eternal life.

But for the Greco-Roman culture, the resurrection of the body was not so much a scientific impossibility. It was a moral impossibility. And an aesthetic impossibility. They thought resurrection was bad, and ugly. The body is a rusty and filthy cage that your soul is stuck inside. This doctrine was, culturally, just as difficult to believe 2000 years ago as it is today, though for different reasons.

If the message of the resurrection of Jesus, and the hope of the resurrection of all the dead, was going to thrive in the first-century world, it would have to have tremendous beauty and great power.

It did. And it does.

I want you to see three things that captured Paul's heart and imagination about the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting---three things that people in the first-century world found almost unbelievable, but so beautiful and so true that it captured their hearts and imaginations, too.

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The first is this:

Jesus Christ (20) was raised from the dead!

There were people in Corinth who were starting to say that the dead will not be raised, in their bodies, to new life. They started saying, "look, Christians, we must believe in Jesus' resurrection. But come on. For the gospel to be good news---to us, and to our culture---we can't go around saying that every dead body in human history will be raised to new life. That's just nasty. It's the soul that counts, not the body."

And Paul shows them that if they think and talk like this, they aren't just disgusted with the body, and with the Christian hope for the resurrection of the body. If they think and talk like this, they're actually disgusted with Jesus Christ! They're disgusted with his body, with his resurrection. They're disgusted with God's own plan to save and redeem humanity through Jesus.

[In the book of Acts, God tells Peter, in a dream, that he can now eat animals that used to be considered unclean. Peter replies, "Lord, I've never touched anything unclean." The Lord says "Peter, if I call it clean, don't call it unclean." And the point is not so much about animals. It's about Gentiles. Peter is going to have his first meal with a bunch of "unclean" Gentiles. "Peter!" the Lord is saying, "If I say that a Gentile is treasured, worthy, and holy, don't you dare say that you'd never sit down at a table and share a meal with him."]

Paul implies it rather than saying it explicitly. But it's as if he's saying "Corinthians: if you say that bodies are disgusting and that it is awful and ugly to think that they will be raised from the dead, then you're calling the holy, beautiful, pure, risen, glorified body--with wounds from his own self-giving death on the cross now glorified and radiant---the body of God's precious Son, ugly and awful. Do you really want to call God's Son ugly?"]

If there's no resurrection of the dead---if the very idea is unthinkable and disgusting---then Jesus wasn't raised from the dead (16). You're putting the crucified and risen Lord back in his tomb if you say that the dead are not raised.

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Paul also says, "And by the way, you're also calling me and all the Apostles liars (15). Because this resurrection of Jesus, and of all the dead, has been the very center of our message. It's been the truth that we've risked our very lives to share with the world. You're calling us idiots. The Greeks and Jews and Romans of course call us, and our Jesus, idiots. But do you, the leaders of the Christian church, really want to say that?"

Paul says: Jesus has been raised, glorified, never to die again.

The second thing:

Your body will be raised on the last day (22-3). If your body and soul belong to Jesus, you'll be raised and glorified.

The intensity of Paul's argument keeps heating up; it keeps getting more and more personal. If there's no resurrection of the body, then there's no resurrection of Jesus. And if there's no resurrection of Jesus, then *you* Corinthians are in *big trouble*.

The resurrection of Jesus was a public announcement that Jesus was, finally, the one true human being, who truly served God all his life, who truly loved his neighbor without any mixed motives and with no selfishness. And by raising Jesus from the dead, God declared that by his perfect life, and his sacrificial death, Jesus had canceled the guilt of our sins, and freed us to walk in newness of life (Rom 6:4).

If, Paul says in verse 17, there's no bodily resurrection, then there's no resurrection of Jesus, and, therefore, *your faith is a complete waste of time*. And worst of all, your sins have not been removed from you as far as the east is from the west (Ps 103:12). Instead, you're still stuck inside them. You think the human body is a rusty, disgusting cage that you can't wait to get out of? You've got it all wrong. The ***guilt of your sin*** is a cage keeping you from freedom; it's an unbearable weight strapped on your back; it's a long, dark tunnel with no light at the end of it. Without Jesus' bodily resurrection, you're still in your sins! And your belief that God has loved you and forgiven you in Christ is completely pointless.

And he goes on. I've said before, the NT is very glad to talk honestly about death. But when it talks about the death of Christian believers, it *never* says "they are dead." It always says "they have fallen asleep." But here Paul says--look (18)--if the dead are not going to be raised, then your friends and family aren't "sleeping"; they're dead, and

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lost forever. And that means that everyone who looks at you Christians and thinks, "wow, look at those pathetic people who believe in nonsense and base their entire lives on stupid beliefs that are completely nonsense"---if there's no resurrection, these people are right, and we Christians are pitiful and pathetic losers who have wasted our lives.

But, Paul says, verse 20, that not only *has* Jesus been raised from the dead; he is the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. Paul is teaching us that there are not two resurrections: Jesus', and then ours. Like the Creed, he's teaching us to believe "in the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." One resurrection! Jesus' bodily resurrection was the firstfruits of a harvest, the guarantee of a full harvest coming soon, a cause of great rejoicing! When the first fruits come in, you can start planning the harvest festival with great confidence. Why can you have hope for your own body to be raised? Why can I trust that my grandma will rise in glory? Because the resurrection of the body has already begun in Jesus' own body!

The third and final thing:

Not only is Jesus certainly raised. Not only is our bodily resurrection guaranteed in Jesus' resurrection. But the whole creation can now hope for its own resurrection and glorification. It's not the central theme of this passage. It's all over the rest of the Bible. But it's here, subtly.

When God completes Jesus' resurrection in our resurrection, he will overthrow every evil spiritual and earthly authority that is determined to keep the creation cursed and dying. And then, he will (24) hand over his conquered kingdom to his Father.

We can't forget that the Bible begins with God's good creation, and ends with the renewal of God's good creation. That the Bible begins in a garden, and ends in a beautiful garden-city. That the Bible starts with a woman and a man and the Creator God enjoying each other's company, and ends with God's temple spreading throughout the entire creation, where women and men enjoy his presence and live under his smile---in a renewed creation---forever. When Jesus puts the final enemy---death (26)---under his feet, then the New Creation will burst into new life, unhindered by death and decay. As Dutch-American theologian Anthony Hoekema says, "the

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doctrine of the resurrection of the body makes no sense apart from the doctrine of the New Earth."

And that's the world in which we will experience, as the Creed says, the life everlasting.

In the end, "I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting" is not an abstract point of Christian doctrine that you can accept or reject, depending on whether it makes sense or not. This is the hope of the world. *Everything, absolutely everything,* depends on it.

How do we live it?

We honor our bodies: they're the same bodies that will be raised and glorified. They're the temple of the Holy presence of God's Spirit. So Paul says in this letter (1 Cor 6) that it's ridiculous to unite our bodies to a prostitute if they are meant to be united to Jesus' own glorious body and filled with the Spirit. Your body is holy; it's been bought at the price of Jesus' own body. Dignify your body by making it the center of God's kingdom activity in your life. And so we feed and clothe them and exercise them and give them over to meaningful work and play and rest.

We honor our neighbors' bodies. They don't belong to us. They were made for the Lord. We don't objectify them. We don't consume them---whether in pornography or in any kind of sexual immorality. We don't have contempt for our neighbor's bodies: whether they are poor and malnourished; or they're limited and vulnerable because of disease or disorder or age; or they don't meet our society's ridiculous standards for beauty. Christians treasure other people's bodies by treating other people's bodies as reminders of Christ's own body.

CS Lewis once said that our neighbor is just about the holiest thing we ever experience. Their bodies will be raised from the dead. If they belong to Christ, they'll be glorified and become so beautiful and so capable that we can hardly imagine it now. Let's believe in the resurrection of the body by honoring and loving our neighbor's body, made by Christ and made for his glory.

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We live this doctrine by honoring ours, and our neighbor's, bodies. We marvel at their capabilities and we grieve over their sicknesses. We hope for their resurrection and glorification. We see Christ in them.

Do you believe it?

You know, we've been studying the Creed for 11 weeks now. The very beginning starts before we were even around: God, a loving heavenly Father, powerfully made Heaven and Earth. All these weeks later, the Creed finishes: This same God, who made all things, will make all things new. He's begun this in Jesus Christ's resurrected body. He'll bring it to completion in our very bodies, and in the glorious renewed world where they'll live forever, as they were always meant to live.

It's a stunning claim. It's weird.

The current creed of our culture is really different. "I believe we are a complete accident. I believe that, by blind chance, space and time and heat and gravity and energy randomly came together to make life possible on one random rock orbiting one minor star. I believe that everything we think, feel, and do, from love to culture, to art, to war, is nothing but a product of this blind chance. I believe, though, that somehow, life is still meaningful if we give it meaning. I believe, somehow, that everyone must be kind and generous to other people, for no particular reason. I believe that at the end of our lives, our bodies and spirits will be gone forever. I believe that our planet will be destroyed when our star explodes, and that will be the end of everything for our species, and for our world. World with a fiery, final end, Amen."

But we are called to confess and believe and live another reality: "I believe that a good God made a good world; a world that has gone bad because of us; but I believe that he has redeemed us and his world, and will fully renew us and his world, world without end, amen."

Which of these two Creeds is good? Which of these is true? Which of these is beautiful?

Do you believe in the name of Jesus? Do you believe, therefore, in the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting?