

Peter's Epistles #20

Resurrection

(also available on-line at Ichthys.com)
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Translation of 1st Peter 1:3-5:

May the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ be praised, who has in His great mercy caused us to be reborn to a hope which lives through Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead, and to an inheritance which will never be destroyed, defiled, or dimmed, but which is being guarded in heaven for us, who are ourselves also being kept safe by God's power and our faith in Him to an ultimate deliverance ready to be unveiled at the end of time.

Introduction: The "living hope" to which we are reborn is the resurrection. God has sown his seed of truth in us (Mt.13; Mk.4; Lk.8), and consequently we have been born a second time, not by the flesh, but by the water of the Word of God and by the Holy Spirit's ministry of that message to us (Jn.3:5; 3:8; 4:10). Through our faith in Jesus Christ, we have this new life in us now and we live in the confident expectation (or hope) that when our Lord appears, this eternal life within us will blossom into a new body in which we shall live with Him forever. This hope of ours is a "living hope", because it looks forward to the experience of eternal life in an eternal body, the "resurrection body".

The Resurrection: The doctrine of the resurrection was of special interest to Peter's first century audience. As we have seen from our initial studies, they were poor and persecuted. In their pain and suffering (a theme of extreme importance in the Petrine epistles), it was thus all the more crucial for them to look forward to the time when they would no longer have to endure the problems and difficulties of this life. It is perhaps not too strong a statement that significant Christian growth is impossible without a certain amount of suffering. To grow spiritually, we must change our way of thinking to God's way, our priorities to God's priorities, and our perspective to God's perspective. God uses suffering to help us change our way of looking at the world and at our life experiences. He uses it to help us learn to lean on Him. The biblical teaching of the resurrection of our earthly bodies into a marvelous eternal body is one of the foci to which our "new thinking" must shift. With the eyes of hope, we can see that future day when our new body will be a reality.

When the apostle Paul addressed his audience on the Areopagus hill at Athens in defense of his faith in their "unknown God", the Athenian elite listened politely until Paul told them about the

resurrection of Jesus Christ (Acts 17:22-34). At the mention of “rising from the dead” some of the crowd put him off, some openly scoffed, and only a small few who found their hearts moved to seek God were compelled to listen further. Today, no less than it did some two thousand years ago, the idea of a literal coming to life of the dead is a fundamentally divisive issue, with those who are willing to believe on one side and those who are content to live their lives without God on the other.

Belief in the resurrection is an absolutely vital component of our Christian faith, because the entire point of that faith is our confidence in deliverance from death through resurrection following the pattern of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. As Paul puts it, if there were no resurrection, then neither was Christ resurrected. And if Christ were not resurrected, then all the teachings of scripture are false and all of our faith is empty and void. Furthermore, Paul, in company with all those apostles and witnesses to Christ's resurrection would be found to be false witnesses against God, if Christ had indeed not been resurrected. If there truly were no such thing as resurrection from the dead, then Christ could not have been resurrected, and so our faith would be completely in vain, for we would still be accountable for our sins. Those who have died before us would truly have perished. If we were indeed only living for the here and now, if there were no prospect of life after death, if our hope of eternal life were a false one destined to die with us, then we Christians would certainly be most worthy of pity in this life (1Cor.15:12-19).

To put it succinctly, resurrection is the only way we can triumph over death, therefore resurrection based upon faith in Him who overcame death is the ultimate goal of our Christian hope. For our hope rests upon the promise that God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that those who were willing to follow His Son might have the opportunity to be victorious over death through resurrection, a renewal of life, even life everlasting (Jn.3:16; 1Cor.15:54-57).

The Christian virtue of hope naturally focuses in on the blessed future that has been promised to all believers. No matter how scorching the burden of the day or how heavy the load we carry in this life, we can look forward in confidence to the "blessed hope" of joy and relief that accompanies the "glorious appearance" of our Lord Jesus Christ (Titus 2:13). Part of that hope is the anticipation of the conquest of evil and the wonders of the Kingdom of Heaven which our Lord will establish on His return, but another large part of the hope mentioned by Titus is our anticipation of receiving a glorious, incorruptible new body in which we shall dwell with the Lord forever. It is for this reason we esteem all earthly things of less value than the attainment of the resurrection (Phil.3:8-11), that we strive to perfect our Christian walk of virtue and enter the Kingdom without stumbling (2Pet.1:8-11), and that we set our minds on heavenly things, looking forward to the transformation of our present, humble bodies to a new reality in keeping with our true citizenship which is heavenly, not earthly (Phil.3:15-21).

The Nature of the Resurrection:

1. Resurrection is an essential part of our future status: Without the resurrection, eternal life would be impossible, for "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (1Cor.15:50). We pass our lives here on earth in this body of flesh, but our true citizenship is in heaven (Phil.3:20-21), and we are confident that just as we now bear the form of earthly flesh (as did our Lord), we shall one day bear the heavenly form of our resurrected Lord Jesus Christ (1Cor.15:49).

2. Resurrection must be distinguished from resuscitation: It is important to note that by resurrection we mean an eternal, unchangeable status, not a temporary return to this same earthly body we now inhabit. When Christ brought Lazarus back from the dead, it was a temporary return, and Martha was correct in her assumption that the final "resurrection" of her brother would have to await "the last day". But part of God the Father's validation of our Lord's earthly ministry on earth included the raising of the dead (Matt.11:5; Lk.7:22), and all of the people so raised by Christ and the apostles still await their final resurrection bodies (Lk.7:11-17; 8:40-42). Incidentally, we can see the resuscitation of Lazarus fulfilling part of its purpose in the gospel of John, for we are told that word of that miracle was the reason for the huge crowd awaiting our Lord on Palm Sunday (Jn.12:17-18). A similar phenomenon is the temporary resuscitation of believers who had died immediately prior to our Lord's crucifixion; by bringing them back to life temporarily, God validated after the fact for all to see the efficacy of His Son's work on the cross for us all (Matt.27:52-53).

3. Resurrection must be distinguished from transmutation: A very small number of believers ended their lives in a most unusual way. Enoch, Moses and Elijah are examples of believers who were "transmuted", that is, who did not experience the death of their physical bodies. These three men were all transferred to eternity apart from death. In the case of Moses and Elijah (though the specific circumstances of their departures differ), the reason apparently has to do with their eventual return for "further service" at the time of the tribulation (Rev.11:1-13). Despite their unusual departures from life, Enoch, Moses and Elijah still await their resurrection bodies along with all the departed believers.

4. Resurrection must be distinguished from interim states: In Revelation chapter seven, immediately after the sealing of the 144,000, the apostle John tells us that he saw "a great multitude, one which no one could count, from every race and tribe and people and tongue, standing before the throne and before the lamb, dressed in white robes and carrying palm branches in their hands" (Rev.7:9-17). Unable to respond to the angel who later asks him who these people are, John is then told that "these are they who come out of the great tribulation" (v.14). These departed believers, dressed according to the fashion of the day, are recognizable in every way as human beings, and even sing a song to the glory of God (v.10). All this is in spite of the fact that they are no longer occupying the body into which they were born, nor have as yet taken up residency in their "resurrection bodies" (since, at this point in time, the resurrection has not yet occurred with the sole exception of our Lord Jesus Christ's human body). We must conclude, therefore, that after physical death, there is an interim state superior to our current

status of mortality, but still inferior to the final state of glory which will be ours at the resurrection. Other passages of scripture support this position as well, such as the brief interview of the departed Samuel by Saul (1Sam.28:13-19), the appearance of Moses and Elijah at the mount of transfiguration (Lk.9:28-36), and, of particular interest, the parable of Abraham's bosom (Lk.16:19-31). In this last example, Jesus gives us rich detail of the interim state and abode as it was before our Lord's ascension. Lazarus, the rich man, and Abraham are all recognizable, and (apart from their presence in eternity), seem indistinguishable from the living. Obviously, what we can know about our interim status in eternity is limited to such detail as we are able to glean from scripture, but, as the above example illustrates, it would be a great mistake to imagine that our person or even our essential human form will be radically altered. We can expect this state (and our ultimate resurrection state) to be *better* to an unknowable degree than what we are now experiencing without making us fundamentally different individuals (apart from the welcome absence of sin).

5. Resurrection is a reality: Questions about the nature and the reality of the resurrection are not unique to our day. Despite Old Testament teaching of the resurrection (witnessed by Dan.12:2), our Lord's unmistakable emphasis on the subject (cf. Jn 5:28-29), and the accurate understanding of those who paid careful attention to His teaching (Jn.11:23-24), during New Testament times the resurrection was nonetheless a matter of skepticism among those who prided themselves on their education and sophistication. In his defense before king Agrippa, the apostle Paul put king Agrippa through an apparently embarrassing experience by forcing him to deal with the question of the resurrection. Cutting through generations of legalistic tradition, Paul makes it clear that the whole center and focus of worshipping God is the anticipation of the resurrection, the true hope upon which the Jewish faith is based (cf. Acts 24:14-15):

And now I stand here before you under indictment because of the promise given by God to our forefathers. It is in the hope of receiving the fulfillment of this promise that our people serve Him night and day, and it is also because of this promise, O king, that I am being accused by the Jews. Why is it considered unbelievable to you that God raises the dead?

Acts 26:6-8

Indeed, the contemporaries of Christ were often as confused about the resurrection and its nature as many of today's Christians are. One important sect, the Sadducees, even denied its existence (Matt.22:23-33). Even the disciples of Jesus were largely in the dark on the issue, as we know from their debate (mentioned in Mk.9:10) about "what this resurrection from the dead meant." Questions about the resurrection usually center either on the time of its occurrence or on the nature of the resurrection body.

The Resurrection Body:

The original, interim and ultimate nature of man has been and will always be the same in one important respect. Man was created by God to be both a physical and spiritual entity. Ever since God "formed Adam from the dust of the ground and breathed into him the breath of life," every resultant "living person" has had a dichotomous nature (Gen.2:7; and cf. Gen.5:1-3). In this life, the body is of purely physical composition (formed originally from the earth), but we look forward with anticipation to the day when we shall be made like to our Lord, possessing a body which corresponds to our spiritual nature instead of to our corrupt, physical one (1Cor.15:44-49). Mankind has been designed by God to have a unity of body and spirit, and in every phase of God's plan, so we do. In this life, our flesh is frail, and corrupted in its very nature by sin. The sin inherent in our bodies (Rom.7:18-20), continues to exercise a pervasive and invidious influence upon us so long as we are still in this world, but our spirits are not in any way tainted by sin, and, provided we but put our faith in the Son of God while yet in this life, shall occupy a sinless home in eternity. Death is thus an aberration, brought about by Adam's sin and then transferred by physical birth to the whole human race (Gen.2:16-17; 3:19; Rom.5:12-21; 1Cor.15:21-22). The result of the sinfulness and frailty of our present, physical body is that we cannot live for very long in our current mortal state. But the death of our present physical body will in no way affect our spirit, and our spirit will be housed in another body (an interim one, followed by an eternal one) immediately following the death of the shell we now occupy. The issue for mankind, therefore, is not death, but rather where it is that eternity will be spent, and whether the new birth will swallow up death in new, eternal life (through faith in Christ), or the first appointed departure from this life will be followed by the second death (through denial of Christ):

It is appointed unto men to die once, and, after that, judgment is in store.
Hebrews 9:27

As we have mentioned, not much is said in scripture of the interim state, a condition which the last generation of believers will not experience, passing directly from life to eternal life or eternal judgment (although the very first believers have been in this interim state for thousands of years now). Still, we do know that along with spiritual existence, the "body" occupied during this period will in fact be discernible as such, and that individuals occupying it will be recognizable, not only by appearance, but also in personality (Lk.16:19-31; 1Sam.28:13-19; Rev.6:9; 7:9-17; 11:1-13).

Scripture naturally focuses instead upon the final, eternal resurrection body, and we are given very definite assurances in the Bible of the doctrines discussed above. We are told in no uncertain terms in 2nd Corinthians 5:3 (in the Greek text) that when our present "tent" is struck, our spirits will not wander about unclothed, but will take up residence in an "eternal home", not an earthly shell, but a heavenly one which has been prepared for us by God. To Paul this was clearly a doctrine of great personal encouragement. Given the wealth of information Paul provides on the resurrection, it will be worth our time at this point to take a rather detailed look at one of the richest passages he gives us on the topic:

Now somebody will no doubt say, "In what manner do the dead rise? And with what sort of body do they come back?" Use a little common sense! When you plant a seed, it doesn't "come back to life" unless the seed itself is first destroyed, does it? And what you put in the ground is not the actual plant which later sprouts, but an "empty shell", so to speak, of the wheat or of whatever you are planting. God then transforms this seed into a plant in accordance with His creative plan, giving each specific seed its own unique structure. [As it is with seeds and plants, the same is true of animate bodies.] For in an analogous way, not all bodies are the same. Obviously, the bodies of men are different from the bodies of cattle, the bodies of birds are different from the bodies of fish and, just as obviously, bodies capable of dwelling in heaven are different from the bodies we occupy here on earth. Moreover the splendor of our heavenly bodies will transcend that of our earthly ones. [Nor should we imagine that all heavenly bodies will possess the same degree of splendor.] After all, the radiance of the sun and of the moon and of stars is different in each case, and even the stars differ amongst themselves in glory.

1st Corinthians 15:35-41

Paul's planted-seed analogy does much to explain what the resurrection body is by contrasting it to our present physical body. In order for the new body to "sprout", the old one must first be placed in the ground, so that our death as Christians is not an end to hope, but rather a sure and necessary prerequisite to the transformation of our present weak form into a glorious, incorruptible heavenly habitation. Furthermore, just as the plant which sprouts is related to the seed and yet markedly different from it, so our heavenly body will be similar to the physical one we now occupy in some respects, but at the same time dramatically different. This only stands to reason, since, obviously, our physical bodies are severely restricted as to longevity, while our spiritual bodies will be capable of living forever. Moreover, the degree of "glory" or splendor of these bodies will vary (based upon reward), just as stars and planets differ in magnitude.

So it is with the resurrection of the dead. The body sown is corruptible, the one raised incorruptible. The body sown is dishonorable, the one raised glorious. The body sown is weak, the one raised powerful. The body sown is suited to physical life, the one raised to spiritual life. If there is a physical body (and there patently is), then there is also a spiritual one. For as it has been written that "Adam, the first man, became a physical being, possessing life", so Christ, the last Adam, became a spiritual being, bestowing life. However it is not the spiritual body, but the physical body which comes first, and the spiritual body follows. The first man was earthly, being taken from the ground. The second Man is heavenly. And as was the earthly man, so also are we of the earth. And as is the heavenly Man, so also shall we be when we too take on heavenly form. For just as we have born the image of the earthly man, so also shall we bear the image of the heavenly Man.

1st Corinthians 15:42-49

Therefore our new body will not be capable of corruption: instead of being indwelt by sin, it will be pure and resplendent; instead of being beset by weakness and disease it will be dynamic and powerful; in short, instead of being attuned to the physical life we now lead here on earth, it will

be in all ways equipped for leading the spiritual life that we shall possess for all eternity. Furthermore, our possession of the new body is a sure thing, and Christ has validated the pattern for us: first the physical body, then the spiritual one. This second paragraph from 1st Corinthians chapter fifteen thus makes it clear that the resurrection body we shall receive will be just as much in the image of Christ's resurrection body as our current body is in the image of our original forefather, Adam. The exact nature of the resurrection body, then, can be better understood only by considering the passages which elucidate Christ's resurrection, for "when He appears, we will be like Him" (1Jn.3:2).

The Post-resurrection, pre-glorification appearances of our Lord are to be found in Matthew 28, Luke 24, John 20-21, and Acts 1:6-11. We may summarize some of the more obvious points about the characteristics and capabilities of His new body (and consequently of the ones we shall inevitably occupy) as follows:

1. Christ's resurrection body is recognizable in all ways as a genuine human body:
 - a. His resurrection body is tangible (Matt.28:9; Lk.24:39; Jn.20:17; 20:27).
 - b. In His resurrection body, He is recognizable as a distinct, unique individual (Lk.24:31; Jn.20:16; 20:20; 20:26-28; 21:12).
2. His resurrection body is capable of normal human activities:
 - a. Speaking (Matt.28:10; 18-20).
 - b. Walking (Lk.24:15).
 - c. Eating (Lk.24:43; Jn.21:12-13).
3. In His resurrection body, Christ has the ability to appear and disappear at will:
 - a. Appearance (Lk.24:36)
 - b. Disappearance (Lk.24:31)
4. In His resurrection body, Christ has the ability to travel with incredible rapidity, and through impenetrable barriers:
 - a. Christ exited the tomb before the angel moved the stone (Matt.28:1-3).
 - b. He moved through the closed doors (Jn.20:19).
 - c. He ascended to heaven (Acts 1:9-10).

We fully expect ourselves and our departed loved ones in Christ to possess a body similar to Christ's at the resurrection. One important point to make, however, is that the majority of the passages which relate to Christ following the resurrection depict Him before his ascension, session and glorification, so that while the body He possesses in resurrection is surely the same before and after these events, His appearance is quite different following His glorification. (Rev.1:12-16, Acts 9:1-6; 22:6-11; 26:12-18). In like fashion, we can expect our resurrection bodies to be "glorious" as well (1Cor.15:43).

After the resurrection then, our new bodies will be similar to our old ones in many important ways, just better in ways we can only imagine. We will still be the same people, but without sin and without all the negatives that affect us in this life (Rev.21:3-4).

Resurrection is the ultimate state of all human beings. Even the unrighteous who reject Jesus Christ in this life will experience a final resurrection (albeit one of condemnation: Rev.20:11-15; cf. Dan.12:2; Matt.25:31-46). The spirit-body unity of man is forever. Death is abnormal, a judgment resulting from the sin of our original parents. As believers, we can look forward to a blissful eternity, an interim state at first (2Cor.5:1-10; Rev.6:9), followed by a perfect, eternal body in the pattern of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Time of the Resurrection: Resurrection is the destiny of all human beings. Therefore the resurrection occurs in two distinct categories: the rising of the unrighteous and of the righteous (Dan.12:2; Heb.9:27).

1. The Unrighteous: The resurrection of the unredeemed occurs at the end of human history immediately prior to their evaluation at "the great white throne" (Rev.20:11-15). This resurrection is therefore part and parcel of the final disposition of those who reject Christ in this life, and, as such, it is an integral part of the gospel (Acts 17:31; 24:25).

2. The Righteous: According to 1st Corinthians 15:20-28, the resurrection of believers occurs in three phases, "Christ the first fruits, then they who are Christ's at His coming, then the end when He gives the kingdom over to His God and Father. " The resurrection of Christ, of course, is already an accomplished historical fact. The other two phases of the resurrection of believers concern us here:

a. "Those who are Christ's at His coming": This, second echelon occurs at the 2nd Advent of Christ (1Thes.4:15ff.). All believers who have already passed on to be with the Lord will be resurrected at that future time when Christ returns to lay claim to His millennial kingdom.

b. "Then the end": At the conclusion of Christ's millennial rule, our Lord will "hand over" the kingdom to our Father (1Cor.15:24), and "death will be swallowed up in victory" (1Cor.15:53-57).

Conclusion: As believers, we look forward with confident hope and expectation to the day when we, like our risen Lord, shall experience the reality of a new, powerful, dynamic, glorious body in which we shall spend all eternity face to face with our God. This life may disappoint, but the resurrection will transcend our imagination. No part of our identity will be erased (with the single, welcome exception of sin). The resurrection will not be a subtraction from the dubious pluses of this life, but an addition, rather a multiplication to a yet unknowable degree, the transformation of our humble estate into a brilliant future that will endure for all eternity. While

the world tells us that we have only the grave to anticipate, we know with the unshakable confidence of faith that just as the grave could not hold Him, neither will it hold us; we shall triumph over the grave, over death by the power and sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ, to spend an endless, blissful future with Him, and in a new body, a resurrection body, which will never know decay. The resurrection, then is truly the "living hope" to which Peter refers and which we Christians embrace: an expectation, confident by means of our faith, of living forever through the resurrection of our bodies; an expectation, a dynamic hope, that the eternal life which resides in us through the new birth will, on that future day, blossom forth into new life, the actual experience of eternal life face to face with our Savior and Master Jesus Christ.