

Scientists have been giving some serious thought to discovering what makes the perfect body. The conclusions of some scientists may not be what you would expect! Apparently, the perfect human body should be short in stature with additional fat. Their research suggests that people of shorter stature have a longer life expectancy than taller people, while being overweight is actually believed to help protect you from a long list of medical problems. I wonder what does God think is the perfect body?

In our first Combined Service for 2017 in January we saw that our future hope as Christians is described in the New Testament in terms of a new creation which will be created for, ruled over by and united under Christ. We saw that the new creation is all about Jesus and not about us. But what will it mean for us? What will you and I be like in these new heavens and the new earth? What type of people will we be? What type of body will we have? What will we look like? How will we think? Some of the clearest answers to these intriguing questions are found in the passage we read from 1 Corinthians 15, which tells us about the certainty, the characteristics and the consequences of our future resurrection.

1. The Certainty of a Resurrection

When the apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, it would seem that at least some people thought that there was no resurrection from the dead at all. We are not quite sure the exact form this idea might have taken. Maybe some of them thought that after this life they would simply exist as bodiless spirits floating around in heaven somehow, a bit like ghosts, but wouldn't really have physical bodies as such. Whatever the precise detail of their thinking, we know that some were saying "that there is no resurrection of the dead" (v.12).

The apostle Paul couldn't disagree more and his logic is set out in verses 16-20. Jesus' own resurrection has proven that there is such a thing as the resurrection of the dead. If there is no resurrection from the dead then Jesus himself could not have been resurrected, and his body must be lying in a grave somewhere in Palestine. Therefore, Christianity is wrong, and we are to be pitied as fools for following a lie. If there is no resurrection from the dead, then certainly talking about Christian hope is a waste of time. But hold on! Jesus did rise from the dead! Paul states that crucial fact and gives a list of those to whom the risen Christ appeared in the early verses of 1 Corinthians 15 (vv.4-8). And in that trailblazing act, Jesus has not only proven there is a resurrection of the dead but he has also prepared the way for his followers to be resurrected from the dead as well. Paul describes the resurrection of Christ as "the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep" (v.20). "First fruits" is a farming term to refer to the earliest fruit of the season. They were always a source of rejoicing and excitement because it was a sign that there was plenty more of the harvest to come. In the book of Leviticus in the Old Testament the term "first fruits" refers to the first sheaf of the harvest given to the Lord (Leviticus 23:10-11, 17, 20) as a token that all the harvest belonged to the Lord and would be dedicated to him through dedicated lives. By describing Christ's resurrection as the "first fruits", Paul is therefore describing how, just as God raised Christ, so he will raise us with a resurrection body. Christ's resurrection is the guarantee of the resurrection of all of God's redeemed people. We therefore have the certain hope of a resurrected bodily life in a new, physical creation.

2. The Characteristics of a Resurrection Body

But what will the characteristics of our new body be? Will we look the same as now? What age will our resurrected body be? What about babies who have tragically died? What age will they be? Will their parents recognize them if they come back as grown ups? I'm sure many of us have had these sorts of questions at some time or another. Well, Paul's answer in vv.35-44 might disappoint you at first. In some ways, his comments about our resurrection body are quite frustrating, aren't they? All we get are cryptic remarks about plant life, animals, birds and fish, and the sun, the moon and the stars. Most of us would like a more detailed description than this.

Paul, however, says that it is foolish to want that level of detail because our resurrection bodies will be a totally different category to our present bodies. The main thing we need to know is that our new bodies will be entirely appropriate for the new creation. On a glorious, imperishable, eternal new earth we will have glorious, imperishable and immortal new bodies. Our bodies will be perfectly suited for a perfect new world. This in itself is exciting. For example, a word like “imperishable” presumably means that our new bodies won’t wear out! Now, wouldn’t that be great! As we get older our bodies start to function less effectively don’t they? For some of us, it is so easy for our backs to go, even through a simple exertion like bending over to pick up a coin we’ve dropped or lifting some bags of supermarket shopping. Others find their joints aching through arthritis or their mobility, agility or eyesight deteriorating or their minds becoming more forgetful. As we get older, these things make us long for the new creation, where we will be raised imperishable.

As good as that is, perhaps the most exciting thing is that each one of us will also be raised as a “spiritual body” (v.44). By using the word “spiritual” I don’t think Paul is referring to some disembodied spirit floating around in the presence of God. That would contradict everything he had said earlier in the chapter. No, it’s more likely that the phrase “spiritual body” refers to a body that is fully empowered with God’s life-giving Spirit. It will be a body no longer controlled by the sinful desires of our present nature but fully and utterly controlled by the Spirit of God. It is in that sense that we will be like Jesus. That is why Paul goes on to say, “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. And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven” (vv.48-49). Now, some people read these verses about us bearing the same likeness as “the man from heaven”, and they think it means our own resurrection body will be like the body Jesus had when he reappeared to his disciples. So we’ll be able to mysteriously appear in locked rooms somehow, just the way Jesus did (John 20:19). And, just as Jesus reappeared with the wounds from his crucifixion, our resurrection body will bear the wounds of whatever we die from. I don’t think that is the case, because Jesus’ resurrection was a unique act in which he quite distinctly reappeared in the body he died in. And with good reason, because that way, there would be no doubt to anyone that it was really him. And so he could conclusively show that he has power over death.

So when Paul says, “so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven”, the context suggests that he is speaking more in terms of the spiritual life of Jesus - that just as Jesus’ body was controlled by the Spirit, and not by sin, we also will receive a Spirit-controlled body. We will gain relief from the inner sinful desires that plague us in this world. Instead, God’s Spirit will saturate our thoughts and desires with ones that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely and admirable. Can you imagine it? Your body will no longer be enslaved by the cravings of a sinful nature. Your body will now be fully energized by God’s own spirit. Now surely that is the perfect body!

3. The Consequences of a Resurrection Body

Whenever I read 1 Corinthians 15, I am struck by how long a chapter it is. It’s actually one of the longest in the New Testament almost double the average length of a New Testament chapter - 31 verses. The length of 1 Corinthians 15 reflects the importance of our bodily resurrection, because it shows that Paul decided to write at length on the topic. And he wrote not simply to outline the appropriateness of our bodies for the new creation to come, nor even simply to defend the certainty of our resurrection from the dead. What seems to have thrilled Paul the most about our resurrection from the dead are the implications for life now - in particular, how our lives are no longer at the mercy of death. You can hear the excitement in his words in vv.50-57, can’t you?

There is a story about a missionary who was working amongst an Indian tribe in Brazil. They were suffering from a contagious disease that had been ravaging the population,

causing many deaths. The missionary decided that the only hope for the tribespeople was to trek through the jungle to reach a neighbouring hospital for treatment. The trouble was that, in order to reach the hospital, they would have to travel through a particular river, which they refused to cross. They believed that evil spirits inhabited this river, and that to enter the water meant certain death. The missionary explained at length that that wasn't true, but they refused to believe him. He led the tribe to the bank of the river and placed his hand in the water, but they would not follow him. He then walked out into the river and splashed water on his face, but still they refused. Finally he turned and dived into the water, swam beneath the surface until he emerged on the other side. As he came up out of the water, he punched the air with his fist to show he had done it and survived. The tribespeople cheered, and only then did they follow him across the river.

That's a great picture of what Jesus Christ has done for us through his death and resurrection. We are trapped in a life in which we are at the mercy of sin and death. Paul describes sin as the "sting of death" (v.56). In other words, sin traps us in death. Once we sin, once the sting goes in, death snaps around us. Because of our sin, death becomes our justified punishment. But by dying on the cross, Christ robbed death of its sting. Jesus Christ, our perfect high priest, offered his life as a perfect sacrifice and substitute on our behalf. On the cross, Christ submerged himself in the death we deserved. But then on the third day he re-emerged to show us his power, and to make clear to those who follow him that death is not final.

Some years ago I heard an intriguing interview between the journalist, Andrew Denton, and the famous naturalist Sir David Attenborough on the topic of death. Here was a famous man, an expert in the natural world, a man who would seem to have lots of things in his life, and yet he said that every day he thinks about death, thinking about how death robs meaning of everything we do. "Why buy this or do that, when I'm just going to die anyway (and there's no afterlife)? What's the point?" is what he constantly asks himself.

The apostle Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 15 couldn't be more different. They are triumphant and full of purpose. Our death is not the end. A resurrection body in a new creation awaits and therefore what we do in this life matters. Paul exhorts us, "Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain" (v.58). In the movie, "Gladiator", Russell Crowe plays the role of Maximus Decimus Meridius, commander of the northern armies of the Roman Empire. There is a memorable and much quoted scene early in the movie when Maximus is motivating his troops before they go into battle against the Barbarian hordes. On the verge of entering this massive and bloody battle, Maximus calls on his men to fight courageously with the stirring words, "Brothers, what we do in life echoes in eternity".

It's a great line. And it's not a bad paraphrase of the apostle Paul's final climactic sentence in 1 Corinthians 15: "your labour in the Lord is not in vain" (v.58). Can you grasp the bigness of that idea? Can you feel the excitement of it? We are called to a life that is far more than being a happy little consumer with a home (either owned/mortgaged or rented) and perhaps some children. We are called to do things that will echo through eternity. There's a bigness to this truth which can transform our present lives into a bit of an adventure, really. Whoever you are, when you are a child of God, one of God's people, you are living a life that's going somewhere and which can make a true and lasting difference. A life which really does echo through eternity, perhaps even in ways we can't begin to imagine.

When we teach a Sunday School class or an English lesson with its Bible component or CRE at the local primary school or a holiday club program at Skipton, when we encourage others in their faith at church, when we support local or overseas mission work practically, prayerfully and/or financially, when we talk to our friends or neighbours about Jesus, when we invite guests to an IYA or other outreach dinner - it may not feel like it at the

time, but these are things which may have consequences that last forever. For Christ has defeated death. There is more to life than simply this life. And therefore it takes on a whole new meaning, as we prepare - and help others to prepare - for that moment, that “twinkling of an eye”, when we will be changed into a glorious, imperishable, immortal and Spirit - controlled person.

That’s our hope in Christ!

Amen

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