

Dust and Heaven

1 Corinthians 15:49

Fresh air is good. You breathed it when you walked from your vehicle to the door of this church; your lungs expanded with it, your body was refreshed.

But how much fresher is the air to one denied it for a time. Those who manned submarines which, in time of war, were constrained to remain submerged as they ran low on oxygen, how fresh did the air taste in their mouths when they finally surfaced!

Water, too, is pleasant on the tongue. But it is many times more pleasant on the parched tongue. One of my friends led a biking trip in which the bikers ran out of water. They rode on and on, their minds becoming more and more aware of their desperate need. So, when they found an abandoned water pump, the crystal stream which came up out of the earth felt like purity itself on their tongues.

Experience takes us under her tutelage and presents us with this lesson: good things are always better when preceded by bad. “Teacher,” we ask, “is there any exception?” She shakes her head. No, every rose develops its thorns before it blossoms. What is good may be good all by itself, but what is best will always be best in contrast to what is bad.

As even your own producers have said, “No movie is worth producing if it has no bad, no conflict, no pain in it.” We cherish the happy ending, but we do not get it by a happy beginning. The hero must near death, with the heat of the dragon’s breath causing his armor to glow, before he can live happily ever after with the princess.

What then should we expect the resolution of this life to be?

If a good God has written the script, and if he has permitted in the plot so much bad, so much pain and turmoil and trouble, what should we expect he is up to? What hath God wrought; what is he writing?

Postpone your answer—really think. The bad that you and I experience in this world is not of a tame and limited sort. There are atrocities happening even now that we must block from our minds for the sake of sanity. There are evils dark as midnight, unutterable wrongs, some of which you yourself may have known. They are not light or laughable.

Why has God opened the door of his creation to allow these fearsome creatures of evil to intermingle with mankind?

Why all this bad?

We reply in the only way we can: he must mean by contrast to make the story end in a way more wonderful than we can imagine. The bad will precede a greater good.

This world, so to speak, has been put into a slingshot, and it is being pulled further and further down into bad and evil and darkness. But as it descends, the tension in the band grows. Now the band is near ready to break with anticipation, it can hardly hold.

Tell me, then: what will happen when it is released? This: resurrection.

All creation groans, and we with it—we feel the tension, we see the depth of the darkness. But the moment God chooses, we will be shot up past the stars of paradise, past the third heaven of bliss; we will soar to heights of eternal happiness that eye has not seen, ear has not heard, and that has not entered into the heart of man.

Our tears are the petals which line the wedding carpet toward the altar of eternity. Our light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. If we walk the dirt trail a ways, we will find its end at the doorstep of a heavenly home.

We will find at the end of our death, a resurrection.

1 CORINTHIANS 15:35-49

This entire text is the answer to one question, asked in verse 35: “How are the dead raised?” Paul answers, “Like wheat.” You bury a kernel of wheat, as you would a deceased man or woman; that kernel is cut off from its stalk, it is effectively dead, a crop corpse. And what happens? It resurrects.

But notice how the dead kernel is raised. When it is grown, is it still wheat? Yes. Wheat was buried, and wheat grows. But is it still a kernel? No. A kernel was buried, and stalks grew. The body before and after the resurrection is different, in the same way that the bodies of different animals and stars are different from each other.

The apostle appeals to us to note this dynamic of resurrection: we who are in Christ, we ourselves will resurrect, we will still be ourselves, *but* we will not be the same selves. We will exist in a different, superior,

more glorious way. Our old way of life, old mode of existence, old body must be swallowed up by the new.

This swallowing up of the old by the new is what leads the apostle to the verse we are considering today, verse 49. The difference between the old and the new comes down to this: our present, old selves are made in the likeness of Adam, the man of dust. As such we are earthly, literally made of the earth, like he was. We are only kernels—we will die and be buried. But our new selves will be made in the likeness of the resurrected Christ, the man who came from heaven and is heavenly. Then we will grow and be the mature wheat. Adam is the dying kernel, Christ is the standing grain.

And so Paul writes, verse 49, “Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust [Adam], we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven [Christ].”

Let us consider then, the old and the new. What are we now, and what will we be? Inspect the kernel of our present existence, and by contrast you will see the golden glory of the full-grown grain. We will pull the slingshot down into our present tragedy and death, and then release it and see what happens.

The man of dust

So first, look at the middle of verse 42: “What is sown is perishable.”

Perishable

In Adam, as long as you are living, you are dying. That was the iron curse that fell like a gavel from heaven when Adam sinned:

By the sweat of your face[, God said,]
you shall eat bread,
till you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
for you are dust,
and to dust you shall return.¹

Dust returns to dust and, my friends, you are dust. When you die, you will deposit your composite parts into the soil.

Isn't this the tragedy of every life, that it is always crawling slowly toward its end?

¹ Gen. 3:19

Like the Grim Reaper of fairy tales, death always looms as a shadow. In our present state we are always dying, and are always one brief accident or mishap away from being dead. Everywhere we look, death, death, death. It's absolutely inevitable—and knowing this is the source of most our fears. As one author wrote, "it is not death, but dying, which is terrible."²

Think of this—it is no coincidence that most of what we fear relates to death. Why are spiders and snakes the special objects of our loathing? Because some are poisonous, some will kill you. Why do we fear heights, except that because by falling from them we could die? We fear swimming because we fear drowning, and we fear small enclosed spaces because we fear suffocation.

For so long the devil has held the power of death in his hand and used it to terrify the sons of men into lifelong slavery. This is what it means to be human.

"What is sown is perishable." In Adam, all die. That includes you.

Dishonorable

But the slingshot is pulled further down.

Verse 43, "It is sown in dishonor."

To be like Adam is not only to be perishing, but to be doing so in a state of shame.

Before the sweet taste of the forbidden fruit had disappeared from Adam's tongue, he and his wife were suddenly struck with shame. And so they covered themselves with fig leaves, masking their dishonor.

Insecurity is the stuff of humanity.

We have some sense of what we ought to be, and some sense that we are not that. Certainly some of you have learned the art of concealing your frailty and fears better than others, but in your quiet moments of introspection you know they are there. We cannot escape all embarrassment until we have escaped our present state of existence, for the two are intertwined.

The people of God are not exempt—in fact, they are more likely to be besmeared with dishonor than the world. The apostles were, in Paul's

² Henry Fielding, *Amelia*.

own words, “buffeted and homeless...reviled...persecuted...slandered... the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.”³

Not only are we dying, but we are dishonored and ashamed. This is what it means to wear the image of the man of dust.

Weak

And yet the band is not yet tense enough, so we pull further.

Verse 43 again, “It is sown in weakness.”

Perhaps you are plagued by a sickness, or by chronic pain. You know what physical weakness is, and you know poignantly what it means to be in Adam’s image.

Just as in our current condition we are not immune to death, so also we are not immune to paralyzing and surprising illnesses. The flu does not work around our schedule; cancer does not ask before it spreads through our bodies.

Or, you may well know what it is to have your hopes deferred, your dreams deflated. You begin some project with enthusiasm, and you end it with fatigue and a sense of failure. You resolve that you will do better in this or in that, you will please God more perfectly and absolutely. And then the wind picks up and your resolve is blown away like the seed head of a dandelion.

You are dying, you are ashamed, you are weak. You are wearing Adam’s outfit. You are in the image of the man of dust. The slingshot is pulled to its lowest possible point. But thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ—it cannot stay there long. It is quite ready to be released.

The man of heaven

Consider again verse 49: “Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we *shall also* bear the image of the man of heaven.”

Do you bow your head and say, “I’m too weak to be a Christian, to have the happiness of a resurrection.” No, no, your weakness is proof you can. “Just as” you are weak in Adam, in your present condition, so shall you be strong in Christ.

This is the message of Easter—that Jesus Christ looked death in the face, took hold of its horns, and wrestled it to the ground. He has

³ 1 Cor. 4:11-13

beaten death, not only in his own case, but also in the case of every person who trusts in him. And, as certainly as such believers have resembled Adam, so certainly shall they soon imitate Jesus, arising from death's grasp with a new and resurrected body. As they rise, those Adamic traits we've mentioned will roll off of them like beads of water.

So, we turn now from Adam and his frailty, we turn from you and I as we presently are, and we imagine what we will be. When our Savior appears, we will be like him—we were destined for this, to be conformed to the image of the Son of God.⁴ We wear the image of Adam now, but soon we will wear the image of this heavenly man, Jesus Christ.

And what will that mean? We release the slingshot—how high does it send us?

Imperishable

See the end of verse 42: “what is raised is imperishable.”

Blessed immortality! Christian, just imagine with me what it will mean to be un-die-able. It means, for one, the absolute termination of any ground for fear.

Considering the account of Jesus after his resurrection, it seems likely that we will still have most if not all of our bodily systems. Jesus ate—the digestive system is there. He breathed, so there are the lungs and, presumably with them, the heart. He saw, the visual and nervous systems; he heard, the auditory; he spoke, the speech organs are present.

He told his disciples directly that he was composed, not of immaterial stuff like a ghost, but of flesh and bones.⁵ He had skin and muscle and his skeletal system.

And yet Jesus exists, and we shall exist, in such a way that none of these systems can fail. I cannot imagine how we can have a bone that is incapable of breaking—but then again, I cannot image how we could have any bone at all. The God who made the one will make the other.

And when we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun, we will grow quite accustomed to our immortality and uninjurability. It will seem very natural to us that we cannot be hurt or

⁴ cf. 1 Jn. 3:2 and Rom. 8:29

⁵ Luke 24:39

die, that our bodies are so composed as to continue undiminished forever.

I am not telling a fanciful tale—if you are in Christ, you will know the honesty of my assertions in a very short time. You yourself, and not another! What a height of peace and ease, when we will be immune from death and all that attends it.

Glorious

We have been slung high—we will soar higher yet. The man of heaven is not only immortal—he is, very importantly, glorious. And so shall we be.

Verse 43, “it is raised in glory.”

I do not know if it is possible here to separate the two delicate pieces of twine, the one being our thought processes and the other being shame and insecurity. The two interlock in this life. And yet the twine will very soon be pulled from each other.

We will no longer have anything to be ashamed of. When you speak with me in glory, I will have nothing to conceal from you; when I converse with you, I will never wonder if you are hiding something, because you will have no motivation to hide any fact behind a fig leaf.

As we progress toward that heavenly state, even here, we are more and more open with each other; as our love and selflessness develops, our privacy dwindles. But we will never fully eradicate shame’s rebel outposts from our minds until they are detonated by Christ’s glorious appearing.

When you wear the image of Christ’s glorious body as your own, you will never again feel one pang of remorse for your past. You will not look on your failures and grieve; you will not consider your sins and want to hide yourself from all society.

The mental friction that has prevented fruitful relationships in your present condition, will in that day be smoothed into ivory. We will, I hope, forget altogether the feelings of embarrassment and self-awareness that we have known, as we bask in the love of our Savior and the unfiltered friendships we will have with each other.

Strong

Death will be swallowed up by life, and shame by honor. But, we continue higher, up to the last joy, which is: your weakness will be consumed by a superhuman strength and an authority.

The end of verse 43, “it is raised in power.”

You will mount up with wings like eagles, run and not be weary, walk and not faint. Whether or not we will sleep in our new bodies I do not know, but I would guess not; there will be no night time, after all.

You will set your feet on a new earth and engage in activities, probably not too much unlike what you do now. Why should God undo all that he has made, when it was made at the first very good? You and I will probably work in some noble employment, will probably read and enjoy leisure activities. These will not displace our enjoyment of God but, even as it should be now, they will be one way in which we enjoy him forever. And we will do all of these things without any lessening of our energy.

Think of all you wish you could do in this life, but cannot because of the limitations of your energy and time. You need not put them on your bucket list; save them for your post-bucket list. You will do so much, and will never tire of what you do.

But your power will not be physical only—you will all have immense authority. As surely as I am speaking to you now, you will someday soon find yourself judging angelic beings. You have been made a little while lower than the angels, but you will soon be crowned above them.

Your weakness, inherited from Adam, will be pushed aside by the colossal power that will be yours in Christ.

Conclusion

We must conclude, but oh that we could see what God has wrought! Our sufferings are so full of meaning—every ache is intended to pull us down, only that we may spring back higher.

Christian, does your earthiness make you droop your shoulders toward the earth? Are you discouraged by the weight of this life? Don't you see, the light weight which you carry now is only meant to prepare your shoulders to carry the weight of glory that will soon be yours. You are pressed down, only so that you may then be shot up into eternal happiness.

So, when you feel pain in your body, remember what relief you will feel when all pains are done away with at once. It will be almost too much to bear.

When you are touched by shame, disheartened by the darker parts of your own heart, call to mind that soon your clogs will all be purged, and your conscience will enter into its unending rest.

And when fatigue overtakes you, use the occasion to imagine what a body that never tires will be like. Because, I promise you, it *will be* yours.

I speak to those who know Christ: behold the the resurrected Christ, in whose image we will be made; this is the hope of Easter.

And, I speak to you who do not know Christ. I have tried to speak of adulthood with a child's tongue, of heaven with a tongue that so far only knows earth; but I hope I have conveyed enough of God's generosity to attract your hearts to him. If you would one day bear the image of Jesus in immortal glory and power, you must trust him now, in this life. The offer of eternal happiness is set before you in color and in detail this morning. What a tragedy to be in earshot of the wedding festivities, and not to enter in while the gate is open.

Believe even now on the Lord Jesus Christ, and your soul will be saved by him; and then, shortly hereafter, when the slingshot of our earthly toils is released, your body will be changed to be like his, forever.