

The resurrection of the body and the life everlasting

What is your image of heaven? When do we enter heaven? And what will we be like when we get there? It is, of course, impossible to know for sure. But that doesn't stop people speculating. Jesus doesn't tell us much about heaven, nor does the rest of the Bible. Largely, I suspect because we would not be able to comprehend something so totally beyond our experience of life on earth, but also because such speculation is unlikely to be profitable. But the Scriptures do reveal some tantalising glimpses of the "life beyond", and one of the passages that does so, 1 Corinthians 15, tells us something that the early church felt was so important they included it in their statement of essential beliefs (the creed, from the Latin *credo*, I believe). Ironically, it is also a belief that probably very few Christians in the world today *actually* believe, even though many of them say they do every week in worship. I refer to the belief in the *Resurrection of the Body*. But it is still there, in Scripture and the creed, so we shall consider this belief, as we have the others in this ancient statement of faith. Let us begin by imagining what life in heaven might be like. Most people, often without specifically thinking about it, assume that in heaven people will exist as *body-less souls*. The Bible, on the other hand, speaks of heaven being populated by entities who are *body-and-soul*. However, Christians have found support in Scripture for both views, so we will need to consider them both.

1. Body-less souls

This phrase expresses the meaning better than the more usual phrase "disembodied spirits", but means the same. This is probably the idea that most people growing up in our society, both inside and outside of the church, imbibe with their mother's milk. It will be a surprise to most of these people that the idea stems originally from Greek philosophy, and particularly from Plato, who lived about 400 years before Jesus. He believed, contrary to what it generally believed today, that what was most real was the "world of ideas". He believed that there existed a perfect world of ideas of which this world was a material, and hence inferior copy. His view was that what was "ideal" was good, and what was material was evil. Matter, including our bodies, only served to prevent us from entering into full communication with the "world of ideas", and so reaching our full potential. "Souls" were once part of the "world of ideas", but migrated to earth and became trapped in matter. The mission of a rational person was to "remember" the ideal world, and to seek to return by means of bringing into subjection every material impulse: wealth, glory, power, or sex (this is where the idea of a "Platonic relationship" comes from. The man of reason may live with a woman with a view to the sharing of minds, but if he were *really* a "man of reason", carnal relationships would play no part in the scenario). In such a philosophy, the soul is a spark of the divine locked in a material shell, and it needed to be rid of its shell to return home to the world of ideas. So the soul of a rational person left the body at death and ascended to the sphere of the divine.

None of this is scriptural. Many Christian theologians in antiquity and in the Middle Ages took it on board, because it was then the dominant philosophy and nobody questioned it. Even a later official statement of faith, known as the "Nicene Creed", because it was agreed at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325, seems to have been influenced by a resurgence of Platonic philosophy, because it speaks more generally of "the resurrection of the dead". But this philosophy has precious little to do with scriptural teaching (though Plato's teaching on the world of ideas does find

some echoes in the Letter to the Hebrews, where reference is made to a “heavenly temple”, which appears to be the underlying ideal of the earthly temple). Yet this is where we get the idea that the soul leaves the body and goes to heaven at death. There are some passages of the Bible that may seem to teach a similar doctrine. For instance, 2 Corinthians 5: 8-10, “We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due to him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.” But compare what St. Paul says in the first verse of this chapter: “Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.” He doesn’t foresee heaven as being populated by disembodied spirits, or body-less souls, but by body-and-soul people, albeit with a different kind of body. This is the scriptural teaching, and this is what the creed means when it speaks of “the resurrection of the body”. And this is what we now turn to consider.

2. Body-and-Soul

The Hebrews never subscribed to this division between “body” and “soul”. They saw man as a *nephesh* – a being comprising both body and soul. In most cases where the word “soul” is used in English translations of Old Testament, this word *nephesh* is in the original. English readers read the Greek concept into the passage, but it was never there. St. Paul does not think of Christians rising to life as body-less souls. He quotes a question asked by his opponents: “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?” And goes on to answer the question: “How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body. All flesh is not the same: Men have one kind of flesh, animals have another, birds another and fish another. There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies; but the splendour of the heavenly bodies is one kind, and the splendour of the earthly bodies is another. The sun has one kind of splendour, the moon another and the stars another; and star differs from star in splendour. So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.”(1 Corinthians 15: 35-44)

This is a long quotation, but it is helpful to see the thrust of St. Paul’s argument here. He is arguing that we shall have a body in heaven, but not the same one we have here. Obviously, St. Paul’s opponents, who found the idea of resurrection unbelievable, thought St. Paul was suggesting a resuscitation of the corpse. But we all know that the body decays in the ground. St. Paul, however, suggests it will be a different body – as different as a plant is from a seed, but with some kind of connection – just as there is a connection between the seed and the plant. The “resurrection body”, of course will be far more glorious. “The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power.” And it will be immortal. A few verses later, when he discusses Jesus’ return in glory, he says: “Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed--in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.”(1 Corinthians 15: 50-52) In this change, which appears

to take place at Jesus' return in glory, dead Christians will receive their new and immortal bodies, and those who are alive will find their bodies transformed into the same immortal form. Such a thing would have been impossible for Plato. In his view, the soul could only enter the eternal realm if it shed its body. No wonder Paul had such a hard time convincing the philosophers of the Areopagus (Acts 17)!

But what is this spiritual body like? Apart from what St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, we are given no information whatever. The only other clues we have are in the accounts of Jesus' resurrection. He is the only resurrected man ever to be seen on earth, and it is possible that memories, or accounts of His risen appearance informed Christian teaching on general resurrection of believers. Jesus had a solid body: he is attested to have eaten fish in the presence of His disciples, but he appeared and disappeared at will behind locked doors. He is recognized by his disciples and he manifestly bears the marks of crucifixion, but they obviously have some difficulty in recognizing Him. The two disciples whom Jesus meets on the way to Emmaus talk with Him for almost the whole journey, but only realise who He is when He breaks bread with them after they reach home. Peter cannot recognize Jesus in the boat after the large catch of fish, only the "beloved disciple". But when they reach the shore, they all know who He is. His body is similar. There is some continuity. But it is also different. It has greater powers and possibilities. Such may be true for every believer. Especially as the New Testament is at pains to stress the sheer humanity of Jesus up to that point, it would be odd if He should "pull rank" and take advantage of "special privileges" right at the end.

So, will I recognize my wife, my mother, Auntie Flo? Well, I might do if I had an Auntie Flo! There does seem to be some suggestion that identification will be possible, even if a little difficult. And, of course there is that saying of Jesus that we shall be "like the angels of heaven, neither marrying nor given in marriage". A sadness for some, but a relief perhaps to those who had more than one marriage on earth. Perhaps the only thing we can say for certain about the after-life, though, is that when we get there it will be like nothing we have ever known or dreamed of. But it will be better.

3. Life everlasting

Perhaps we should give some consideration to these, the last words of our statement. Many of the issues connected with this phrase have already been discussed – either here or in "and he will come to judge". But we must emphasise that, for the New Testament, eternal life is not all "pie in the sky when you die", but it is something believers can experience *here and now*. Jesus says: "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life." "*Has crossed over*", not "will cross over". Jesus promises his followers that they will share in the life of God *now*, but that there will also be more to come. My wife tells a story about how she, as a child, once spent Christmas with an uncle. They travelled by train, and so her mother could not pack all her Christmas presents, but just packed a few. My wife says she was quite happy with the presents she received on Christmas morning, and completely content. But when she returned home, there were all the other presents waiting for her. It is the same with Christ's promises to his followers. There is a great amount now – there is the power and gifts of the Holy Spirit, the joy of a personal relationship with God, and the fellowship of believers. But there is even more to come in GBod's heavenly kingdom in glory.