

The redemption of our bodies

A Pauline primer on resurrection

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There can be no question about it. From the moment of his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, Paul is a man transformed by resurrection. First, it is the *risen Jesus* who appears to Saul the Persecutor one day in a blinding flash of light and transforms his identity and mission into that of Paul the Proclaimer (Acts 9:1-20). Then, as Paul carries out this new mission of proclamation on behalf of the risen Jesus, it is *resurrection* that he proclaims. In fact nothing is more crucial to Paul's proclamation than the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Luke tells us that when Paul stands trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, he sums up his entire mission in the

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language of resurrection: "I am on trial concerning the hope of the resurrection of the dead" (Acts 23:6c NRSV; cf. 24:20-21; 26:6-8). Conversely, Paul depicts for the Corinthian church the catastrophe that would result for all who hope in Christ if, as some Corinthian believers maintain, the dead are not raised: "For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who

have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Cor. 15:16-19).

But with this dire depiction Paul has set up a straw horse, only to knock it down. In the next breath he proclaims, firmly and decisively, "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died" (1 Cor. 15:20). It is this fundamental reality, the resurrection of Christ and the sure promise of future resurrection for the believers, that undergirds the entirety

of Paul's proclamation of the gospel.¹ And it is this unshakeable truth on which Paul builds as he nurtures the fledgling churches of the first-century Mediterranean world into faithful life "in Christ."²

What then are the basics of Paul's belief in the resurrection of Christ? And what, in turn, does the Resurrection mean for all who

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place their faith and hope in Christ? The answers to these questions not only offer us a Pauline primer on resurrection but also point us to the heart of Paul's proclamation of the gospel.

Resurrection is the sovereign act of God.

Nothing is more fundamental to Paul's views on resurrection than the role of God in raising the dead to life. Resurrection is God's prerogative, and exclusively so. To the Roman believers Paul depicts God as the one "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (Rom. 4:17). To the Corinthian believers Paul describes God as the one "who raises the dead" (2 Cor. 1:9). And every time Paul uses the specific vocabulary of resurrection,³ the actor, whether expressed or implied, is God.⁴ Paul's thinking has no room for any sort of jack-in-the-box theology. Jesus, for his part, does not spring back to life through his own power or because of his inherently divine character. Rather it is God, and God alone, who raises Jesus—and ultimately those who "belong to him" as well⁵—from the dead. Resurrection is the expression of God's power and of God's intention for the course of human history.

Resurrection is God's cosmic strategy for dealing with the last enemy. As Paul makes clear throughout his letters, the God who raises the dead is a God who wills life over death. Yet as Paul well knows, death is still at large in the world; it is a powerful force ravaging the human community. Paul's language points consistently and undeniably to this reality. In his letters the vocabulary of resurrection is linked regularly and directly to the vocabulary of death,⁶ because resurrection by its nature presupposes death. As Paul makes clear to his readers, death is present, powerful, and evil. And death is not simply one evil power among many in the world; it is the ultimate evil power, "the last enemy" of humankind (1 Cor. 15:26). Death is that power whose victory and whose

sting rob human beings irretrievably of the life that God has given them (1 Cor. 15:55). Thus in the end death itself must and will be destroyed (1 Cor. 15:26).

Accordingly, God's sovereign act of raising Jesus from the dead is nothing less than the first stage of God's cosmic, end-time strategy for destroying death, the last enemy of the human race. And God's divine power at work in the coming resurrection of the dead will be, by the same token, God's final and frontal assault on death itself, an assault that will forever rob death of its potency and the grave of its victims. Resurrection is, in short, God's politics of life in a world dominated and ravaged by the power of death.

God has raised Jesus from the dead as the first fruits of God's resurrection power. Paul proclaims this good news to the scattered and struggling churches of the first-century Mediterranean

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world: death may still be an everyday reality and a powerful force for evil in the world they know, but the power of death is no longer ultimate. In fact, as Paul relates tirelessly to his readers, God has now invaded the realm of death and raised Jesus from the dead.⁷ And with this sovereign act of power God has demonstrated, clearly and decisively, that death no longer has the final word in the cosmic scheme of things. In the resurrection of Jesus, life has overtaken the dominion of death (see Rom. 6:9). For Paul this means

that the resurrection of Jesus is the crucial event of history, the event that changes everything.

Throughout his letters Paul spells out the implications of this pivotal event for Jesus himself. Because of the Resurrection, Christ "will never die again," since "death no longer has dominion over him" (Rom. 6:9). Instead, Christ who "was crucified in weakness" (2 Cor. 13:4a) and died a death to sin (Rom. 6:10a) now lives "to God" (Rom. 6:10b), a resurrection life characterized by power (Rom. 1:4; Phil. 3:10) and enabled "by the power of God" (2 Cor. 13:4b). Because of the Resurrection, Christ has been "declared Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness" (Rom. 1:4) and is now "Lord of both the living and the

dead” (Rom. 14:9). And the Christ Jesus who died and was raised is now at the right hand of God and intercedes with God for the believers (Rom. 8:34).⁸

Paul also explains to the Corinthian believers that the risen Christ is not simply the present-day demonstration of God’s resurrection power but is the pointer to what lies ahead. In Paul’s

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words the risen Christ is nothing less than “the first fruits of those who have died” (1 Cor. 15:20, 23), God’s sure promise of resurrection life to come for all those who are in Christ. Because God has raised Christ from the dead, all those who place their faith and hope in Christ will one day share in this same resurrection life.

God will one day raise the believers just as God has raised Christ. If Paul fills his letters with assurances that God has raised

Jesus from the dead, he likewise reminds his readers that what God has done for Jesus, God will one day also do for them. Beyond the metaphorical references to “Christ the first fruits,” Paul speaks directly of the linkage between the destiny of Christ and that of the believers. As Paul explains to the Corinthian church, “The one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence” (2 Cor. 4:14; cf. 1 Cor. 6:14). And to the Roman believers Paul says, “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you” (Rom. 8:11). Paul assures his readers with confidence that resurrection is the destiny of all those who belong to Christ.

But this resurrection destiny comes with a cost. Those who hope one day to be raised together with Christ must first follow Christ into baptism, suffering, and death. It is those who “have been buried with [Christ] by baptism into death” who will “walk in newness of life,” “just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father” (Rom. 6:4). It is those who suffer with Christ who will “also be glorified with him” (Rom. 8:17; cf. Phil. 3:10). It is those who “have been united with [Christ] in a death like his” who will “certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his”

(Rom. 6:5). And it is those who “have died with Christ” who will “also live with him” (Rom. 6:8). For the believers as for Christ himself, resurrection is God’s response to a life of obedience “to the point of death” (Phil. 2:8).

Resurrection is a matter of the body. As difficult as it may be for the Hellenistic believers of Corinth to accept, the resurrection that Paul proclaims is the resurrection of the body. And this truth lies at the heart of Paul’s resurrection teaching. Resurrection is not, as Paul’s Greek compatriots would understand it, a matter of freeing one’s spirit by divesting oneself of the body. Nor is the body itself an evil from which one longs to be freed.⁹ Instead, as Paul sees it, the body of the believer is a creation of God (cf. 1 Cor. 15:35-49), a “member of Christ” (1 Cor. 6:15), and a “temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 6:19). “The body,” in Paul’s words, “is for the Lord, and the Lord for the body” (1 Cor. 6:13). The implication is that the body itself is destined for resurrection. Paul assures the Roman believers that God “will give life to your mortal bodies” (Rom. 8:11). And in the very middle of Paul’s discourse to the church in Corinth about the use of the body (1 Cor. 6:12-20), he reminds these believers pointedly (v. 14) that “God raised the Lord, and will also raise us by his power.”¹⁰ The body of the believer has a destiny in the resurrection, far beyond death and the grave.

Paul seems to have little idea about what that resurrection life will look like (2 Cor. 12:1-4). In any case, he offers no specific details to the Corinthian believers, who appear to be vitally interested in this matter. Instead Paul responds to their urgent question about the resurrection body with a handful of basic affirmations. What is “sown” is not “the body that is to be” (1 Cor. 15:37). It is God who “gives a body” to what is sown (1 Cor. 15:38). What is sown is a body that is “physical,” “perishable,” and “weak”; what is raised is a body that is “spiritual,” “imperishable,” and “powerful” (1 Cor. 15:42-44). More than that, Paul seems to suggest, you don’t need to know.

In the present moment believers wait, with all creation, for the redemption of their bodies. Paul is clear about two things. The resurrection of Jesus has already happened. And the resurrection of the believers is not yet a reality. And in this present moment, between the “already” and the “not yet,” those who

belong to Christ live tenuous lives in a world itself marked by “bondage to decay” (Rom. 8:21), and they “wait for . . . the redemption of [their] bodies” (Rom. 8:23).

This time of waiting is not an easy time, either for the believers or for creation. For the believers the present moment is marked by sufferings (Rom. 8:18), “momentary affliction” (2 Cor. 4:17), physical wasting away (2 Cor. 4:16), inward groaning (Rom 8:23; 2 Cor. 5:2, 4), and a longing for the heavenly dwelling that will replace the “earthly tent” of the body (2 Cor. 5:1-2). And creation fares no better. As Paul puts it, creation itself has been “subjected to futility” and is even now “groaning in labor pains” as it “waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God” and for freedom from its own “bondage to decay.”¹¹ The present moment is indeed a time of great pain.

But there is cause for confidence even in the midst of affliction and groaning. Those who wait for the coming “redemption of [their] bodies” (Rom. 8:23) and long for the “glory about to be revealed” (Rom. 8:18)¹² are even now gifted by God with the

Spirit, God’s guarantee that one day life will indeed swallow up death (see 2 Cor. 5:4-5; Rom. 8:23). “So,” Paul concludes, “we are always confident” (2 Cor. 5:6).

Faith in the “already” resurrection of Christ and hope in the “not yet” resurrection of the believers empowers the church for faithful living here and now. Here the sandal leather finally meets the road for Paul. A

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pastor at heart, he is vitally concerned about the real lives of real believers. And everything that Paul has to say about faith in Christ ultimately issues in the ethical praxis of everyday life. Paul is passionate to proclaim the Resurrection not because it is some strange new teaching that can tantalize minds (cf. Acts 17:16-21) but because it is the power of God that can transform lives. As Paul sees it, God has raised Jesus from the dead so that believers might “walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:4), “bear fruit for God” (Rom. 7:4), and “live no longer for themselves but for him who died and was raised for them” (2 Cor. 5:15). And for Paul the powerful hope of the resurrection to come brings all of life into focus and calls forth faithful living in every moment of every day:

“Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (1 Cor. 15:58).

This is Paul’s primer on resurrection. And this is a word for living and for dying. Thanks be to God.

Notes

¹ Throughout this essay I will draw my evidence from the “non-disputed” letters of Paul: Romans, 1/2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon.

² This is Paul’s distinctive terminology for the life of Christian discipleship. See, for example, Rom. 8:1; 16:7; 1 Cor. 1:30; 15:18; 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 1:22; Phil. 1:1; 1 Thess. 2:14; Philem. 8.

³ Thus *egeiro*, “to raise”; *anistemi*, “to rise”; *anastasis/exanastasis*, “resurrection.”

⁴ See, for example, explicit references to the action of God in Rom. 1:4; 4:24; 6:4; 8:11; 10:9; 1 Cor. 6:14; 15:15, 38; 2 Cor. 4:14; 13:4; Gal. 1:1; 1 Thess. 1:10. Elsewhere Paul implies the action of God through the use of the passive verb “was raised” without a designated actor. See, for example, Rom. 6:9; 7:4; 8:34; 1 Cor. 15:4, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 20, 22, 29, 32, 35, 42, 43, 44, 52; 2 Cor. 5:15. In the two instances in which Paul uses the language of “rising” (1 Thess. 4:14a, 16b) the surrounding text (1 Thess. 4:14b, 16a) clearly implies that this rising comes about through the action of God. So also Rom. 10:9 provides the implied actor for Rom. 10:7. And within this broader context Paul’s references to “his [= Christ’s] resurrection” (Rom. 6:5; Phil. 3:10) or “the resurrection of/from the dead” (Rom. 1:4; 1 Cor. 15:12, 13, 21, 42; Phil. 3:11) are clearly to be understood as the action of God.

⁵ Cf. 1 Cor. 15:23.

⁶ See, for example, Rom. 1:4; 4:17, 24; 6:4, 9; 7:4; 8:11; 10:9; 1 Cor. 15:12, 13, 15, 16, 20, 21, 29, 32, 35, 42, 52; 2 Cor. 1:9; Gal. 1:1; Phil. 3:11; 1 Thess. 1:10; 4:16.

⁷ See, for example, Rom. 1:4; 4:24, 25; 6:4, 5, 9; 7:4; 8:11, 34; 10:9; 1 Cor. 6:14; 15:4, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 20, 22-23; 2 Cor. 4:14; 5:15; 13:4; Gal. 1:1; 1 Thess. 1:10; 4:14; Phil. 3:10.

⁸ For the believers themselves Jesus’s resurrection means, in Paul’s terms, “justification” (Rom. 4:25), “life [for] mortal bodies” (Rom. 8:11), “[rescue] . . . from the wrath that is coming” (1 Thess. 1:10), and salvation (cf. Rom. 5:10; 10:9).

⁹ But see 2 Cor. 4:16–5:10, where Paul speaks of wishing to be “away from the body and at home with the Lord” (5:8; cf. 5:6, 9). Paul seems to be referring to an intermediate state after the earthly body has died and before the resurrection [see Gary Yamasaki, “Jesus and the End of Life in the Synoptic Gospels, in this issue, 40–47].

¹⁰ See also Phil. 3:20-21, where Paul speaks of the eschatological moment in which the “Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” whom the believers await “from heaven” will “transform the body of our [humble bodies] that [they] may be conformed to his glorious body.”

¹¹ See Rom. 8:19-22.

¹² Cf. Rom. 8:19, 21; 2 Cor. 4:17.

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