

Resurrection of the Body

John Hepp, Jr.

“I stand on trial because of my **hope in the resurrection of the dead.**”
(Acts 23:6, like 24:21)

“I have the same **hope** in God as these men, that there will be a **resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked.**” (Acts 24:15)

“It is because of my **hope** in what God has promised our fathers that I am on trial today. This is the promise our twelve tribes are **hoping** to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God day and night. O king, it is because of this **hope** that the Jews are accusing me. Why should any of you consider it incredible that **God raises the dead?**” (Acts 26:6–8)

The Christian Hope. The passages quoted above are from three different chapters near the end of Acts.¹ In each case the apostle Paul was standing as a prisoner before rulers and summarizing his Christian hope. As always in the Bible, one’s “hope” is not a doubtful dream but a confident expectation. In this case, what Paul was sure about was the resurrection of the body, an essential teaching of Christianity and the whole Bible.

A Foundational Teaching. Bodily resurrection, of course, does not mean simply that the soul survives death. Instead, it means that each soul will be joined to its restored body that can relate to the material world. The whole person who died will be reconstituted. This was taught even under the Old Covenant, as indicated by words I have bolded from Hebrews 6:1–2:²

Therefore let us leave the **elemental teachings about Messiah** and go on to maturity, not laying again **the foundation** of

- (1) repentance from acts that lead to death, and of (2) faith in God,
- instruction about (3) baptisms [NASB, *washings*³], (4) the laying on of hands,
- **(5) the resurrection of the dead** and (6) eternal judgment.

The author of Hebrews here lists six teachings we should “leave” in order to “go on to maturity.” He gives them two titles: (a) “the elemental teachings about Messiah” and (b) “the foundation.”⁴ These six are all Old Covenant teachings that continue in the New Covenant, albeit with a fuller, more advanced content. For example, item 3 refers to ceremonial “washings.” These were

¹ All Bible quotations in this paper are from the New International Version. Any emphasis is added.

² I have also inserted numbers and changed “Christ” to its equivalent, “Messiah.”

³ “New covenant baptism is a different word and always singular; whereas the plural word used here [*baptismos*] definitely means Jewish ceremonial washings in Hebrews 9:10 and Mark 7:4. (For examples of such washings see Exodus 29:4–6; 30:18–21; Leviticus 6:27; 8:6; and Numbers 19.)” (Stan Toussaint in my LIT course on Hebrews)

⁴ To “leave” these teachings does not mean to abandon them completely, since they are “the elemental teachings about Messiah” and “the foundation” (v. 1). The first title is literally “the message of the beginning about Messiah” (Greek, *ton tes arches tou Cristou logon*). This seems equivalent to “the elementary truths” (Greek, *ta stoichea tes arches*) just mentioned in Hebrews 5:12a. Some of the *stoichea* are clearly identified with Old Covenant teachings in Galatians 4:9–10 (cf. Col. 2:20). The same word is used of the alphabet, which all children should learn. Since Messiah has come (and we can “read”), we must advance beyond the alphabet (5:12a). There is yet another figure in 5:12b–14 for these teachings: milk. We should not live on Old Covenant milk only, now that there is meat.

common under the Old Covenant but are now transformed into baptism and spiritual washings. Whether transformed or not, all six items are permanent in the foundation. Among them is bodily resurrection.

A Clear Old Testament Prediction. Though the Old Testament says little specifically about resurrection, the following is a clear prediction. It is found near the end of the last great vision given to Daniel (Daniel 10–12). As usual, the revealing angel had spoken of Daniel’s people Israel as they suffered—and would suffer—among the nations until their kingdom would be restored. The angel predicted a future “time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep **in the dust of the earth will awake**: some **to everlasting life**, others **to shame and everlasting contempt**” (Daniel 12:1b–2).

This prediction of a resurrection “to everlasting life [or] to...everlasting contempt” has a parallel in the New Testament. Jesus spoke about the “Son of Man” (Jesus Himself): “A time is coming when all who are **in their graves** will hear his voice and come out—those who have done good will **rise to live**, and those who have done evil will **rise to be condemned**” (John 5:28–29).

In Ignorance Sadducees Denied the Resurrection. When Jesus was questioned about the resurrection, He showed that it was implied by all of God’s former revelations. “Some of the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to Jesus with a question” (Luke 20:27). These Sadducees were not honest; they did not seek information. Instead, confident that a resurrection would entail insoluble problems, they sought to confuse Jesus and discredit Him. They presented Him a hypothetical situation of one woman having been married successively (and lawfully) to seven brothers. “Now then, at the resurrection whose wife will she be?” (20:33).

“You are in error,” Jesus replied, “because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God” (Matthew 22:29).⁵ Then He added,

“The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. But those who are considered worthy of taking part in that age and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage, and they can no longer die; for they are like the angels. They are God’s children, since they are children of the resurrection. But in the account of the bush, even Moses showed that the dead rise, for he calls the Lord ‘the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive.” (Luke 20:34–38)

Notice the following facts about Jesus’ answer to the Sadducees:

- He was not proving that the soul survives death but that the body will be raised.⁶
- Although He used several present-tense verbs to describe the resurrection (“can...are...are...are”), they referred to the future (“that age”).

⁵ Ignorance of these two matters still keeps people from believing in the coming bodily resurrection.

⁶ This passage is often interpreted to mean only that the soul lives on. It does mean that. But survival was not (a) the Sadducees’ error stated in the introduction, nor (b) their question, nor (c) the bulk of Jesus’ answer. In all three sections the key word is “resurrection.”

- Those who are “worthy” will rise and become “God’s children” (Romans 8:23).
- Those glorified (risen) people will no longer be married or get married or die.
- To prove the resurrection, He quoted Moses (who quoted God, Exodus 3:6): God was the God of the patriarchs centuries after their deaths.⁷

God’s Promises Require Resurrection. How does God’s calling Himself “the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” prove that they will rise from the dead? The reason is not stated but implied: God will fulfill His promises that involve their bodies.

1. God had given them promises that involve the body—but had not fulfilled them. Hebrews 11 says so. God had called Abraham “to go to a place he would **later receive as his inheritance**” (11:8). Yet, “by faith he made his home in **the promised land** like a stranger in a foreign country” (v. 9a). “He lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of **the same promise**” (v. 9b). In fact, Abraham had “numerous” and “countless” descendants (v. 12), who “all...were still living by faith when they died. They **did not receive the things promised**; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance” (v. 13). In other words, they had died without inheriting the land and related blessings God had promised.
2. God has not forgotten those promises and will fulfill them. Those people have not for ever disappeared. “He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive.” Therefore, He will raise them in order to fulfill His promises.

Old Testament Promises. Such promises fill many Old Testament pictures of God’s coming eternal kingdom on earth. No one can inherit that kingdom without an eternal body (1 Corinthians 15:50). Therefore, many prophetic pictures have the resurrection as their tacit background. Consider, as one example, the picture of the coming kingdom in Isaiah 11. The chapter first describes the Anointed Ruler (that is, Messiah, vv. 1–3a), then His rule (vv. 3b–16). He will bring justice to the nations (vv. 3b–5), peace to nature (vv. 6–9), and glory to His people Israel in the promised land (vv. 11–16). All of these involve bodies. Therefore, if Abraham—or anyone else—is to fully participate in that kingdom, he must be raised.

New Testament Promises. The same thing is true in the New Testament. Every passage that promises our eternal life in Messiah’s kingdom also requires that we will have bodies. Although most passages do not say so explicitly, some do. Here are some samples of both kinds:

- “Many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 8:11)
- “The Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done.” (Matthew 16:27)
- “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies.” (John 11:25. He gave evidence of this by proceeding to raise Lazarus.)

⁷ All Jews, of course (like every serious Bible student today), knew the timing of “the account of the bush.” It came centuries after Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had died. It was significant that in that account God did not say “I was” their God but “I am” their God (Exodus 3:6, present tense implied in Hebrew).

- When Messiah, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. (Colossians 3:4)
- “The time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding your servants the prophets and your saints....” (Revelation 11:18)

Nowadays many wrongly assume that they will say goodbye to the earth for ever. If they expect “to **inherit the kingdom** he promised to those who love him” (James 2:5; cf. Matthew 25:34; 1 Corinthians 6:9, 10; Galatians 5:21), they confuse that kingdom with heaven. In the Bible are many prophecies of a coming kingdom on earth, picturing life in a restored world, with material and political elements. **Not one of them pictures future life in heaven!**⁸ How should one understand such pictures? Spiritualize them? Assign them all to the Jews? Or accept them?

Resurrection Assumed in Acts. The resurrection of Messiah Jesus was a constant theme in Acts (see 1:21–22; 4:2; 13:32–37; 17:31–32). As you will see in 1 Corinthians 15, His resurrection strongly affirms our own. Notice some other samples where the resurrection is assumed in Acts.

- “He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore **everything** [including people], as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.” (Acts 3:21)
- “God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen....He commanded us to preach...that he is the one whom God appointed as **judge** of the living and the dead.” (Acts 10:40–42. Revelation 11:17–18 clearly relates “the time...for judging the dead” to His future kingdom.)
- “For he [God] has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.” (Acts 17:31)

A Growing Heresy, That the Resurrection Has Taken Place. In his last extant letter the apostle Paul warned, “Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly. Their teaching will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have wandered away from the truth. **They say that the resurrection has already taken place**, and they destroy the faith of some” (2 Timothy 2:16–18). How could they destroy anyone’s faith with such a claim? How could they convince anyone that the resurrection had taken place when they could see unglorified saints all around them? We conclude that their heresy had to do only with dead believers in heaven, saying that they had received their glorified bodies when they died. Such a teaching lessens the urgency of the Lord’s return. It shifts our attention from His coming glory to the saints’ current bliss.

The same heresy is common in Western Christianity. Many funerals are conducted with absolutely no mention of the coming resurrection. The following promises in 2 Corinthians 5:1–8 are often misunderstood.

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.** Meanwhile we groan, longing **to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are**

⁸ Many think that Revelation 21–22 describes heaven. Instead, it describes the kingdom on earth after the heavenly capital city comes “**down out of heaven** from God” (21:2, 10; cf. 24).

clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but **to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling**, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life....Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. We live by faith, not by sight. We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.

Notice first, that this passage describes the resurrection body. It is called “an eternal house in heaven” and “our heavenly dwelling” with which we will “be clothed.”⁹ It will replace our present body, “the earthly tent we live in.” If it is eternal, it will never perish. If it is “heavenly,” it is glorious. It is clearly no temporary body made to last until the resurrection.

Notice second, that we have mixed feelings about death. (a) On the one hand, “As long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord”; therefore, “we...would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.” That describes death as desirable. Yet, (b) on the other hand, we would love to avoid death altogether (“not...be unclothed” and thus “not be found naked”). That could happen only at the Rapture, when the eternal body will come down over the present body (“be clothed...so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life”).¹⁰

Notice third, that most saints will not avoid death. They must “fall asleep” in Jesus and wait for the resurrection at His coming. Four times dead saints are described as “asleep” in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18, waiting to be “raised” when the Lord comes. The picture in verse 14 there is the same as in the close context of 2 Corinthians 5: “We know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence” (4:14). This same thought in both passages again shows that the resurrection was future in both.

No Passage Teaches Resurrection at Death. As just seen, 2 Corinthians 5 does not teach that we get our heavenly body the moment we die. Neither do other passages, such as the following.

- Luke 16:19–31 recounts the Lord’s parable of the rich man and Lazarus. In His story each had a body after death. How so if the Scriptures clearly assign resurrection and judgment to the Lord’s return (1 Corinthians 15:23; 2 Thessalonians 1:5–10)? Because not all aspects of the parable were intended to teach literally. If they were, then we should believe that the damned (a) are in the same Hades as the saved ones, separated by a visible chasm, and (b) can talk to at least some of them. Instead, the parable was designed to teach much more important things, such as, God’s justice and the need for repentance based on the Scriptures.
- Revelation 6:9–11 says that “under the altar” in heaven John saw “the souls of those who had been slain because of...the testimony they had maintained.” They were calling for vengeance. “Each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer.” Do robes imply that these “souls” had bodies, at least interim bodies while they wait? Perhaps so. However, in Revelation John apparently always saw humans in heaven as

⁹ As usual in the Bible, “heavenly” speaks primarily not of locality but of origin—not where but what quality. Our “inheritance,” says Peter, is “kept in heaven” (1 Peter 1:4) but will be given to us “when Jesus Messiah is revealed” on earth (vv. 7, 13).

¹⁰ “Be clothed” in this verse 4 combines *epi* with the verb, picturing the new body coming on top of the old one.

robed—even the martyrs of 7:9, 13. He saw angels robed, too (15:6), though they are spirits without bodies (Hebrews 1:14). So it is not clear whether the martyrs in Revelation really get interim bodies or not. It is clear, however, that they will get glorified bodies when Messiah returns to earth to reign (19:11–16). At that time they are specifically described to “have part in the first resurrection” (20:4–6).

The Resurrection Chapter, 1 Corinthians 15. You have seen that in Acts 23:6–8 and other verses the apostle Paul summarized his hope as the bodily resurrection. That was no ploy; resurrection is essential, as seen also in 1 Corinthians 15. That chapter does not prove Messiah’s resurrection but shows that it inaugurates the final process for us all. Read it with the help of the following.

- I. The Fact of Bodily Resurrection, vv. 1–34
 - A. Messiah’s Resurrection Essential to the Gospel, vv. 1–11. The gospel Paul preached and by which the Corinthians were being saved (vv. 1–2) was that Messiah died, was buried, was raised, and appeared to many people (vv. 3–7), including Paul (vv. 8–11).
 - B. Consequences of Denying Messiah’s Resurrection, vv. 12–19
 1. The issue: Messiah’s resurrection implies the resurrection of others, v. 12.
 2. The dire consequences if Messiah is not risen, vv. 13–18
 - a. If not, there is no basis for the gospel, vv. 13–15.
 - b. If not, the gospel cannot bring forgiveness, vv. 16–18.
 3. Conclusion: Believers in such a gospel are the most pitiful of all humans, v. 19.
 - C. Messiah’s Resurrection Has Inaugurated a New Program, vv. 20–34.
 1. Messiah, the firstfruits (proof, pattern, pledge of the coming harvest), vv. 20–23a
 2. Those who belong to Messiah, at His coming, v. 23b
 3. [The rest at] the end, when He has destroyed even death, vv. 24–28
 4. Our practical response, vv. 29–34
 - a. Being baptized “in behalf of the dead” (v. 29)¹¹
 - b. Enduring dangers (vv. 30–34)
- II. The Advantages of Bodily Resurrection, vv. 35–57
 - A. The Resurrection Body Superior to What Is Sown, vv. 35–49
 1. Distinct, vv. 35–41. God has made many kinds of bodies, with different glories.
 2. Superior, vv. 42–49
 - a. Not perishable but imperishable, v. 42
 - b. Not dishonored but glorious, v. 43a
 - c. Not weak but powerful, v. 43b
 - d. Not natural but spiritual, vv. 44–49. Like that of the last Adam, the man of heaven.
 - B. The Resurrection Body Is the Ultimate Victory, vv. 50–57.
 1. Will enable believers to inherit the kingdom, v. 50
 2. Will be given to both living believers and dead believers, vv. 51–52
 3. Will be the final victory over death—through the Lord Jesus Messiah, vv. 53–57

The Final Exhortation, v. 58: Be firm and sold out, because labor in the Lord is not in vain.

¹¹ This may refer to new believers who fill up the ranks being depleted by death.