

THE IMAGE OF THE MAN OF HEAVEN

1 Corinthians 15:35–49

Key Verse: 15:49

“Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.”

Who do you look like? Your dad? Your mom? A mixture? We all probably spend too much time worrying about our appearance. Some people even develop what’s called “cacophobia,” a fear of ugliness. But as the old English idiom goes, “Pretty is as pretty does,” or “Handsome is as handsome does.” If our *behavior* is ugly, it doesn’t matter what we *look* like. Still, people work so hard on their “image.” Some not only meticulously groom themselves; they also carefully craft a narrative of their lives, to present the best public image. The truth is, it’s not how good we seem, but how we *behave*, especially how we treat others, that reveals who we truly are. If we’re living in denial, we can’t see our real image. Then, the older we get, the uglier we become, no matter how hard we try. People will see us as “grumpy old men” or “grumpy old women.” How can we have hope? In this passage Paul says that through faith in Christ we’re promised a resurrection body and will bear the image of the man of heaven. It’s one of the greatest promises of the Bible. What does it mean? What difference does it make to believe this? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living word today.

Let’s briefly review what Paul’s been saying. In verses 1–11 he shared the two main pillars of the gospel: Christ died for our sins and he was raised from the dead, with many eyewitnesses. In verses 12–19 Paul explained that believing in the resurrection is absolutely necessary, or our Christian lives have no meaning. In verses 20–28 he proclaimed that in the Risen Christ we’re made alive now; we can see Christ reigning, spreading his kingdom, and we’re assured he’s coming again, when he’ll raise us also, then hand his entire kingdom over to God the Father, for his glory alone. In verses 29–34 Paul challenged us to live with resurrection faith, through his words, “I die every day!” He wants us to join him—die to our sinful nature, die to the world, die to self—so we can genuinely live for Christ. Now in this next section (35–49) Paul turns to describe what our resurrection bodies will be like. Not only will they be fit for heaven, they’ll also bear the image of the man of heaven. What does it mean, and how can we believe it?

Part 1: A seed sown (35–44)

Look at verse 35. “But someone will ask, ‘How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?’” Paul knew people have a hard time believing in the resurrection of the body. Why? We never see it. And, it just seems impossible. Once a body dies, it decomposes and turns to dust. How can a pile of dust come back to life again? Come on,

really? Some Corinthians thought they were wise by worldly standards and were mocking the whole idea of the resurrection.

How does Paul respond? Look at verse 36. “You foolish person! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.” Paul already warned the sophisticated Corinthians that the wisdom of the world can make us fools in God’s sight (1:19–20). Now he explains the wisdom of the resurrection based on self-evident truths even children can know and understand. Before we see a seed come to life, it first has to die in the ground. But the death of the seed makes way for a new body, which was the seed’s purpose all along to produce. Look at verse 37. “And what you sow is not the body that is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain.” A bare kernel is so different from the body it produces: like a black watermelon seed and its big melon; or a tiny morningglory seed and the lush, gorgeous vine that comes from it. Likewise, our current bodies are like seeds, and something amazing is going to come from them. Paul just said that those who dismiss the resurrection “have no knowledge of God” (34). Now he helps us all, step by step, to think more about who God is and what he does. In fact, the resurrection is based on God’s reality. Read verse 38. “But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body.” This reminds us of Genesis 1:1: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” The Creator God creates something out of nothing. He created not only the material world, but all of life. God had “the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed...each according to its kind” (Ge1:11). This Almighty Creator who fills the earth with such a vast array of life has no problem creating a resurrection body.

Paul says that God gives each seed “a body as he has chosen” (38a). The Greek word “chosen” can also mean “purpose.” Paul used this same word “chosen” to describe how God arranges each church member in the body, for his own purpose (12:18). In verses 39–41 Paul suggests more about God’s chosen purpose for our resurrection body. But first let’s think about what it means that “to each kind of seed” God gives “its own body” (38b). In nature, a distinctive seed determines the kind of body that comes from it. Scientists tell us it’s the seed’s DNA that enables it to produce a body with very specific traits. So, what does “it’s own body” mean to us? Paul is saying that though our resurrection bodies will be as different from our present bodies as plants are from seeds, we’ll still be the same person, with the same unique identity: “to each kind of seed” he gives “its own body.” So we don’t need to fear the resurrected transformation of our bodies, but trust God who knows what he’s doing. To help us understand, Paul turns from plant life to consider more of the variety and wonder of God’s creation.

Look at verse 39. “For not all flesh is the same, but there is one kind for humans, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish.” With a panoramic view of all creatures, Paul describes how God created each kind of flesh for its own kind of

environment: human and animal flesh for land, bird flesh for the skies, and fish flesh for the seas. If God already has done this on earth, of course he can create a new resurrection body with the new purpose of living in heaven. So next, Paul lifts our eyes upwards. Look at verse 40. “There are heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is of one kind, and the glory of the earthly is of another.” Here he stresses the vast difference between heavenly and earthly glory. The glory of earthly bodies is temporary, lasting just a season, or a brief lifespan, whereas the glory of heavenly bodies seems to shine into eternity. Because we’re made in God’s image, we long for such eternal glory (Ro5:2; 8:18,21; 2Co4:17–18; 5:1). What good news: we’re going to receive a resurrection body fit for this eternal, heavenly glory! Paul invites us to dwell just a bit longer on the glory of the heavens. Read verse 41. “There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory.” These heavenly bodies, which everyone can see, reflect the spectacular power and glory of God who made them all. As the Psalmist says, “The heavens declare the glory of God” (Ps19:1a). Each heavenly body has its own captivating glory. God who made such infinite wonders will give each believer his or her own resurrection body with its own unique, heavenly glory, like the twinkle of each star.

Back here on earth, the reality is, the aging and death of our bodies is discouraging, even humiliating. So Paul puts it all together for us. Read verses 42–44. “So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; it is raised imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; 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. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.” Paul is telling us our bodies are like seeds: they perish, with no special honor; they’re so weak, and embarrassing. But he repeats four times here that they’re going to be “raised.” God who made all heaven and earth is going to raise us with a new body that’s imperishable, glorious, powerful and spiritual—fit for an eternity with him. Why? It’s hidden in the mystery of who God is. Paul writes in 2:9: “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him...”

Part 2: The image of the man of heaven (45–49)

In this last section Paul continues to explain the spiritual logic of the resurrection body. Look at verse 45. “Thus it is written, ‘The first man Adam became a living being’; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit.” He’s quoting from Genesis 2:7, and returning to his earlier contrast between Adam and Christ (21–22). Just as through our common ancestor Adam we all received our natural bodies, so through “the last Adam” Christ, who’s “a life-giving spirit,” all believers will receive our resurrection bodies. Paul also reminds the Corinthians, who thought they were so spiritual already, that the natural comes first, and then the spiritual (46). Then he develops this contrast further. Read verses 47–48. “The first man was of the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from

heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven.” Basically, he wants us to reflect on the weaknesses we inherit from Adam. So Paul actually creates a new expression here in Greek: “a man of dust.” Reminds us of “Pigpen” from the comic strip Peanuts. As a man of dust, Adam was fragile and weak; so are we. But Jesus, the man from heaven, is strong enough to overcome the world. If we put our faith in him, we’re promised the forgiveness of sins and a living hope in heaven. As the old hymn “O Worship the King” says, we’re still “frail children of dust, and feeble as frail.” But if we rely on the man from heaven, we gain the power to resist the devil, and the victory that overcomes the world (1Jn5:4).

Finally Paul describes our greatest glory. Read 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.” When we believe, we wish we could be changed right away. But it doesn’t happen. In this fallen world our sinful nature doesn’t just evaporate. Our sanctification is such a slow, painstaking process, and we fail over and over again. Sometimes we wonder what’s wrong, or if we’ll ever change. We grieve and mourn over our chronic sins and our sinful nature that keeps rearing its ugly head. But God, in his great mercy and grace, promises that through faith in Jesus, one day he’s going to clothe us with the glorious image of the man of heaven, his sinless Son Jesus Christ. It’s nothing but the amazing grace of God!

And what’s his image? It’s so beautiful, words can hardly suffice. It’s his compassionate heart, kindness, humility, meekness and patience; it’s his bearing with sinners, forgiving and loving them (Col3:12–14). As we depend on him and on his Spirit, we get a taste of his character now. And God promises his image, his character, will be our future reality, as sure as the resurrection itself. God is using “all things” in this life, including our sufferings, to “conform us to the image of his Son” (Ro8:28–29). And in heaven, we’re all promised to “bear” his image, meaning it’ll be a permanent part of our resurrection body, our heavenly clothing, our utmost glory. No wonder it’s called “heaven”! 1 John 3:2–3 says, “Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.”

We all need this hope, to bear the image of the man of heaven. With this hope we persevere in our struggles, defeat the devil’s accusations, and even start reflecting the glory of Jesus to those around us. 2 Corinthians 3:18 says, “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.” What an amazing promise! With the help of God’s Spirit, let’s start beholding the glorious image of Jesus, with resurrection faith and hope.