

I Believe In The Resurrection Of The Body

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by John Brug

The resurrection of the body is a vital truth of our Christian faith. Without this truth our faith is a useless dream. "If Christ be not raised, your faith is in vain. Ye are yet in your sins. Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable." (I. Cor 15:17-18). We need to study this teaching often and deeply because it is essential for our own comfort and for the strengthening of our faith, and because this teaching has always been one of the chief points of attack by skeptics, scoffers and false brethren from the days of Christ and the apostles to the present day.

Most people believe in some type of life after death. Man likes to believe that in some way his spirit will live on after death. Scripture is much more specific. It teaches not only a continued life and existence for the soul, but the resurrection of the body as well.

In fact, the original of the Apostles' Creed is even more specific, for it speaks not of the resurrection of the body, but of the resurrection of the flesh. In this respect, it is even stronger than the Nicene Creed which speaks of the resurrection of the dead. The term "resurrection of the flesh" is certainly a very striking choice of words, since the Scriptures so often use "flesh" as a term for our sinful nature. Our sinful nature is often called "flesh" because it is often the appetites of our fleshly body that lead us to sin, and we have served sin with the members of our body.

Paul can say, "I know that in me, that is in my flesh dwelleth no good thing." (Ro 7:18) Or again, "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God." (I Cor. 15:50) "They that are in the flesh cannot please God." (Ro 8:8).

Because of such passages, some theologians have objected to the creedal term, "the resurrection of the flesh." Generally these objections have merely been an opening ploy for a denial of the resurrection of the body. Therefore, although the exact term, "resurrection of the flesh" does not occur in the Scripture, this creedal term is a very good one. It sets forth some important positive points, and it guards against false teachings concerning the resurrection in the strongest possible way .

On the positive side, the term "resurrection of the flesh" reminds us of the importance of this body of flesh in God's work of creation, redemption, and sanctification.

The body is more than an accident, a garment, a temporary prison house of the soul. From the creation it is clear that God intended man to be a creature with body and soul united. Man was not to live in the realm of spirit like the angels. He was not to live on the plane of purely physical life like the animals. Man was a unique creature, standing between, partaking both of the spiritual and moral responsibilities of the angels and the dependence on the physical world of the animals. God created the body and soul to go together. Both are precious parts of his creation.

The body of flesh is vital to the work of redemption. Christ became flesh to redeem our flesh. Indeed, as far as we can judge from God's revelation, Christ's work of redemption was impossible without a body of flesh. "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity, so that by his death he might destroy him who held the power of death, that is, the devil.... He had to (opheilen) be made like his brothers in every way in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest." (He 2:14, 17). "For what the law could not do, in

that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin condemned sin in the flesh.” (Romans 8:3).

There is something essentially incomplete about the soul until it is reunited with the body. Christ redeemed both body and soul. They belong together. For God’s plan of salvation to be complete, for the restoration of his creation to be complete, it is necessary for the flesh to be raised and reunited with the soul in glory. That is why “we ourselves who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” (Ro 8:23).

The work of redemption is not complete until body and soul have been reunited in holiness through the power of Christ’s death. It is a testimony to the greatness of Christ’s work that even the flesh, which was so contaminated and corrupted by the sin which inhered in our very nature, will be redeemed in glory and restored to holiness.

This body of flesh is also the seat of sanctification. This body belongs to Christ, and it is the dwelling place of His Holy Spirit “The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit which is in you, whom you have from God. You are not your own. You were bought with a price. Therefore honor God with your body.” (I Cor 13-20).

This body of flesh is important. The respect which we show for the body in our customs of burial is a fitting testimony of this importance. Michael, the archangel, contended with Satan for the body of Moses (Jude 9). The body was not mere food for worms, of no real value. It belonged to Christ who redeemed it and reserved it to be restored and to share in His glory.

The flesh, as it is, sinful and earthly minded, cannot inherit the kingdom of God. But the flesh which is cleansed and glorified by Christ will live forever in glory and holiness.

This precious truth of the resurrection of the flesh has been under attack from the days of Hymeneus and Philetus and the Sadduces to the present. Some false teachers have denied the possibility of any life after death. Others have denied some portion of the resurrection, such as the resurrection of the ungodly. Others believe in life after death, but not the resurrection of the body.

It is in combating the more subtle forms of this last heresy, that the term “the resurrection of the flesh” is especially useful. With the sly misuse of language which so often characterizes heresy, some theologians who deny the resurrection of the body continue to use the term in a different sense. C.J. Soodergren, an American Lutheran theologian, demonstrates this in his article “Resurrection Carnis” in the Augustana Quarterly, April 1944, pp. 111-126. Soodergren believes in the resurrection of the body, but not the resurrection of the flesh. For him the resurrection of the body is the continued existence of our spiritual body which leaves our material body after this life ends. He says, “This spiritual body inhabits our material body in this life, is contemporaneous with it, but also independent of it, leaving it at death and continuing to serve as the habitation and medium of the immortal self. Early writers called it the ‘astral body’.” For Soodergren the term “spiritual body” means no body at all. The word “body” is abused to mean an airy immaterial variety of spirit without flesh and blood. In spite of his attempt to use weasel words, it is clear that Soodergren’s view and those like it directly clash with Scripture at numerous points. Soodergren’s view is a form of the teaching of Hymeneus and Philetus, for he too teaches that the resurrection is past. He ignores even the clear statement of Jesus, “It is I myself. Handle me and see, for a spirit hath not flesh and bones as ye see me have.” (Lk 24:39).

All types of objections have been raised to the resurrection of the flesh on the grounds that it is unreasonable or impossible. To the Saducees who raised the problem of seven husbands to a wife, to the scoffer who asks about a body eaten by cannibals, which then becomes part of their bodies too, and to every sceptic, one simple reply suffices, "Ye do err greatly, not knowing the power of God." "Why should it be thought a thing incredible with you that God should raise the dead?" God who made the universe from nothing will find no difficulty in restoring the bodies he once created.

THE TIME OF RESURRECTION

There is one resurrection of the body for both believers and unbelievers. This one resurrection of the flesh will occur on the day of Christ's return to judge the earth. "The hour is coming in which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth. They that have done good, unto the resurrection of life, and they that have done evil unto the resurrection of damnation." (John 5:28-29). Scripture offers no basis for the notion that there will be two bodily resurrections separated by 1000 years. There is one resurrection of the soul, the new life that becomes ours through faith in Christ and which continues through all eternity. There is one resurrection of the body, for all on the Last Day (John 6:40 and John 12:48).

THE CAUSE OF THE RESURRECTION

Because Paul compares burial to planting a seed in the ground, some have conjectured that there is a certain vital germ in the dead body which provides the impetus for the rebuilding of the body from the elements of the earth. But the dead body is not like a seed having its power in itself, waiting only the right conditions of warmth and moisture. Paul's point in making the comparison with a seed is no self-contained power, but the emergence of new life after being placed in the ground. Scripture attributes the power of resurrection to the Triune God, not to inherent powers of the body.

In the Scriptures the resurrection is attributed especially to Christ. The dead are called forth by the voice of Christ. (Jn 5:28) . This is especially appropriate because He is the judge appointed by divine decree. It is fitting that the appointed Judge of all summons all to appear before Him. (Jn 5: 21-22, Ac 17: 31, He 9: 22) Christ has destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light. He is the first fruits of the resurrection. It is appropriate, therefore, that He calls forth His own to everlasting life. (I Cor 15: 20-22) In dogmatic terms Christ is the effective cause of the resurrection through His power as Judge. He is the meritorious cause of the resurrection of believers through His work as Redeemer. Since Christ and the Father are one, it should not trouble us that, as an *opus ad extra*, the resurrection is also ascribed to God the Father. (Jn 5:21, I Cor 6:14, Ro 4:17, II Cor 1:9)

Since we are studying the resurrection as part of a review of the third article, the role of the Holy Spirit in the resurrection should be of special interest to us. The Holy Spirit is linked inseparably with the resurrection, because He is our link to Christ. He is the Spirit of life, who has freed us from the law of sin and death (Ro 8: 2) The Spirit has been given to us as a down-payment and guarantee of the eternal life, for which God created us (II Cor 5:4-5, Eph 1:14).

The interrelationship of Father, Son, and Spirit in our resurrection is best expressed by Romans 8:11: If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus Christ from the dead is living in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.

THE NATURE OF THE RESURRECTION BODY

Our resurrection body will be the same body which we had on earth, the body which was separated from the soul, which was placed into the grave, and which decayed. The very term

“resurrection” implies a restoration of that which once existed. The corresponding change to glory in the bodies of those who are still alive at Christ’s appearance also indicates the continuity from our lowly body to our glorious body. We need not debate or speculate about the many different atoms or cells that have made up the ever-changing composition of our bodies from day to day throughout our lives. We simply accept the fact that God will restore the bodies we once had. We leave the “how” in his hands. Matthew 22:29 solves all problems.

Though we will rise with the same body which we once had, it will be very different in quality.

First of all, it will be a spiritual body. (1 Cor 15:44) How are we to understand this rather strange term, which almost seems to be a self-contradiction? First of all, it is plain from Scripture that we will have a material body. Though we will have a spiritual body, we will not be spirits. The term “spiritual” does not refer to the substance of the resurrection body, but to its qualities.

Theologians have centered their comments on two areas. The first is the control of the body. The natural (*psuchikos*) body is the body which is not controlled by the Spirit, just as the natural man (*psuchikos*) does not receive the things of God (I Cor 2:12-14) and the (*psuchikos*) are those who do not have the Spirit. (Jude 19) The spiritual body is the body which is completely obedient to the guidance of the Spirit. Though the Spirit is already at work in our bodies, only in the resurrection will His control become complete. The *soma psuchikon* is a body filled and controlled by the *psuche*, the sensory and earthly life. The *soma pneumatikon* is a body filled by and controlled by the *Pneuma*. In the resurrection the whole man, body and soul, will walk at the direction of the Spirit.

“Chemnitz writes: Bodies in this life are called [], not because they are changed into souls or have the same substance as the soul, which is a spiritual “substance”, but because they are moved to action and governed...by the soul. So in the resurrection the bodies will be [] not because they will be changed into spirit or be of the same substance with the Holy Spirit, for they will have and retain their nature or bodily substance...but they will be spiritual because what the soul now is to the body, the Spirit will be to body and soul.”

In discussing the term “spiritual body”, theologians have also turned their attention to the needs and desires of the body. Gerhard says,

“Their bodies will no longer be natural (*animalia*) bodies standing in need of food, drink, sleep, and other supports, but spiritual in which there is no strife of the flesh and spirit, but which are perfectly subject to the control of the spirit, are entirely ruled by the Holy Ghost and need no food or other means for their support.”

Luther shares this opinion.

“The new spiritual body will not live this natural life and will require neither food or shelter, will possess neither wife nor child, nor use any other physical necessities of life. Although it will possess life, it will no longer be a eating, sleeping, and digesting body, but will be fed and sustained by God and will find life entirely in Him. It will nevermore think of eating and drinking.”

I think it is safe to say that we will *need* no more food and drink when there is no more growth, waste, or decay in the body, and that we will never hunger or thirst when God supplies our every need. But I believe the question of whether there will be literal eating and drinking when we sit with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of God is a question best left open. At least we know that Christ was capable of eating in his glorified body and eternal life is often spoken of in terms of a feast.

Several qualities of this spiritual body have direct Scriptural testimony and are beyond question. It will be an immortal, incorruptible body which is not subject to sickness, weakness, or death. It will be a glorified, powerful body. It will be a body which is strong and sound. “There shall be no more death, neither, sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain.” (Re 21:4) “They that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars forever and ever.” (Dn 12:2). “Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father.” (Mt 13:43).

Here we are on solid ground of direct Scriptural statements. When the Lutheran dogmatists began to draw conclusions based on the term “spiritual body” and the statement “our body shall be like unto His glorious body”, they get on much more speculative ground. They spoke of the invisibility of the resurrection body to non-glorified eyes on the grounds that it is a spiritual body, and that after His resurrection Christ had to make His body visible for it to be seen. They said that the body would not be subject to the touch of the non-glorified (*impalpabilitas*). Although the body would be in a certain place, it would not be there in a circumscribed way (*illocalitas*). The body will be able to pass through objects (*subtilitas*) and quickly move wherever it wishes (*agilitas*). I think we should be warned here against being too speculative and placing too much weight on conclusions which Scripture does not state. We should be cautious about drawing too many conclusions about our glorified bodies from the actions of Christ after His resurrection.

More was involved in the actions of Christ than a glorified body. Christ was not just a glorified man, but the God-Man in His state of exaltation. How many of His abilities were due, not to His glorified body, but to the personal union? He showed the ability to pass through crowds unmolested and to walk on water before His resurrection. Where is the line between Colossians 2:9 and Philippians 3:21? I think it is best to stick with the direct statements of Scripture and leave enlightenment on the other points to the Heavenly School.

Concerning the “age” of the resurrected body there have been three opinions. Augustine, among others, held that in the resurrection everyone will be a youth. On the basis of Philippians 3:21 others believe that we will all be the age of Christ. The most common opinion is that in the resurrection we will be the “age” which we were at death. The only Scriptural references which may be relevant are the fact that Christ rose as He had been buried and the reference to the small and great (*megalos kai mikrous*) standing before God. (Re 11:18 and 20:12) There certainly will be no ravages of old age or sickness. Was the retention of Christ’s wounds a special case? I think so. Concerning sex most believe that all the members of the body will be restored, not for their former use, but for the wholeness of the body. Luther said, “Wheat seed yields wheat, Barley yields barley. So it will be in the resurrection.”

As there is a glorification of believer in the resurrection, so there will be a corresponding degeneration in the bodies of the damned. “They shall go forth and look on the carcasses of the men that have transgressed against me, for their worm shall not die neither shall their fire be quenched, and they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh.” (Is 66:24). Though their bodies will be immortal and incorruptible in the sense that they will not suffer extinction and dissolution, they will not share the glory of the resurrection body but will be living in a state which is more appropriately called death than life.

As we see and experience the sickness and weakness of this body of flesh and as we sympathize with the pain all around us, let us pray for the day when our lowly bodies will be fashioned like after his glorious body.

I BELIEVE IN THE LIFE EVERLASTING

Scripture teaches the reality of eternal life. It describes this life as a state of everlasting happiness, consisting in the uninterrupted beatific vision of God, in the perfect and eternal restoration of the divine image, in final, complete, and everlasting deliverance from all evil and in the unending enjoyment of rest, happiness, and glory.

THE PLACE OF EVERLASTING LIFE

The Scriptures use a rich variety of terms to describe our eternal home. It is called heaven (Php 3:30, I Pe 2:4), the new heavens and the new earth (II Pe 2:13), Paradise (II Cor 12:4) the kingdom of God (Lk 12:32), the Father's house (Jn 14:2, eternal habitations (Lk 16:9) Jerusalem above or the New Jerusalem (Ro 21, Ga 4:6) our Fatherland (He 11:13-16), the Holy of Holies (He 9:2; 10:19 and Abraham's bosom (Lk 16:22). It is life and life a everlasting (Mt 7:14, 18:8), salvation 2 Tim 2:10), our inheritance (I Pe 2:4), glory (Col 1:27), ruling with Christ (2 Tm 2:12), sitting at the table in the kingdom (Lk 14:15, Lk 22:30), a wedding (Mt 22:1ff, Re 19:9), a feast (Lk 14:15ff), rest (He 4:1, 9), and the world to come (He 6:5).

These terms overwhelm us with their richness and variety and leave us with many questions that we can now answer only in part. Are we to make any distinction between the present place of rest for the souls of believers and the eternal home where we will dwell with God forever? I believe that the creation of a new heavens and a new earth, the restoration of all things, and the deliverance from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God, all imply some change and further development which will occur at Christ's return.

The new heavens and new earth, in which we will dwell in glorified flesh, may well have more of a "material" nature than the present heaven where the souls of departed believers are at rest with God. To avoid the materialistic concept of heaven of the Jews, the Moslems, and, to a lesser degree, the Reformed, Lutheran dogmaticians have emphasized the symbolical and metaphorical nature of the descriptions of our eternal home. In most cases they have quite flatly ruled out literal eating and drinking. They have generally stated that we will be free of all limitations of space and time. I think we should be more cautious in dismissing as purely symbolic such statements of Jesus as Luke 22:30 "Ye may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel." How much of the Bible's description of eternal life is symbolical? This is another question that will be answered only in the Heavenly School. I cannot find any Scriptural statements to support the view that there is nothing material about the new heavens and earth, or that we will have the same freedom from time and space which God has.

Where is heaven? For the present we can say that heaven is God's dwelling place, but it cannot be placed on a map of this present material universe. In eternity this universe will no longer exist so the question is irrelevant. What is important is not that we can locate it on a map or describe all the details of life there, but that we know the way to get there and are sure that through Christ we are traveling that road.

Recognizing the limits of our present knowledge and understanding, let us now turn to the information about eternal life which God has given us for our comfort and encouragement.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF ETERNAL LIFE

The most important characteristic of eternal life is that we will be with God, we will see Him as He is, and He will be all in all to us. (Re 21:3; I Jn 3:1; I Cor 15:28) The greatest joy of eternal life is the enjoyment of God Himself.

What does it mean that we will see God as He is? Will we see Him with our minds or with our eyes? Will we see God the Father or only Christ who is the express image of the Father? Will the all invisible God reveal Himself to us through some special theophany?

Again I do not believe that the relevant passages give a definite answer.

Follow peace with all men and holiness without which no man shall see the Lord. (Heb. 12:14)

When He shall appear... we shall see Him as He is. (I Jn 3:2)

I will behold Thy face in righteousness I shall be satisfied when I awake with Thy likeness. (Ps 17:15)

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. (Mt 5:8)

Now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then shall I know even as I am known. (I Cor 13:12)

The throne of God .. and of the Lamb will be in the city. His servants will see His face. (Re 22: 3-4)

The first two references refer to Christ, not the Father, and it is true that when we have seen Christ we have seen the Father (Jn 14:8, 1:18). However, the next four references seem to imply more. In some way we shall see the Father "face to face."

Passages which speak of the impossibility of seeing God, such as I Timothy 6:16 and Hebrews 11:17, speak of sinful man and do not rule out some physical way of seeing God in some form of theophany more glorious than those of the Old Testament or in some manner of seeing beyond our present understanding. The use of the same term "face to face" suggest that in some way our experience will approximate the experience of Moses, but in Glory will it not be even more glorious. Is Paul's experience in II Corinthians 12 related to the beatific vision? If so, its very unspeakableness warns us against excess speculation.

Nevertheless, it would be profitable for us to examine some of the ideas concerning the *visio Dei* which have been held in the history of the Church. Medieval Catholicism spoke of a *Visio per essentiam*. The saints are able to see the Triune God *per essentiam* through the *lumen gloriae* which is an added supernatural gift. This supernatural, created power of recognition infused into the soul enables man to see God *per essentiam*, but not exhaustively. Alleged Scriptural support for this is Ps. 36:9 "In thy light do we see light."

Eastern Orthodox tradition denied the *visio per essentiam*. Since God's essence is invisible, one may see God only in terms of the energy that proceeds from God.

The Lutheran dogmaticians emphasized the intellectual understanding of God, which is related to the restoration of the image of God, as the chief component of the vision of God.

Hollaz says,

Our eternal and highest blessedness consists in the perfect sight and enjoyment of God. The beatific sight of God is an act of the intellect illumined with the light of glory, by which it perceives God clearly and immediately, and as He is in Himself. The enjoyment of God is an act of the will, by which the blessed in the heavenly country most eagerly embrace God as the highest God, most delightfully comprehend Him, and are fully satisfied with Him.

This is very close to Aquinas' definition of seeing God:

We are primarily united with God by an act of understanding, and therefore, the very seeing of God, which is an act of the intellect, is substantially and basically our happiness. It is followed by the greatest enjoyment. This joy which belongs to the will is a formal complement of happiness.

Gerhard believed that in heaven we will understand such divine mysteries as the Trinity, the eternal generation of Christ, and the personal union. Will we understand these mysteries about God's essence in eternity? I think the best answer is "I don't know." Hollaz left matters wide open when he said, "The blessed will get to know the total essence of God, but not totally or in an infinite manner, but in a manner suitable to their finite nature, namely, in the highest degree of perfection of which the finite intellect, elevated by the light of glory, is capable."

Reformed theologians generally refused to discuss "the obscure questions of Scholasticism," denied the *visio per essentiam*, and focused on theophanies and seeing Christ.

In summary, what can we say about the *visio Dei*? It will be a manner of seeing God altogether different and more glorious than the manner of seeing God in this life. Though our knowledge of God will not match God's infinite knowledge of Himself, it will be a full knowledge, for then "I shall know, even as I am known." Our knowledge of God in eternity will be an image of the divine self-knowledge, a knowledge created by God in our human mind. Our seeing God in eternity will not be limited to the eyes of our mind. Job said, "In my flesh shall I see God, whom I shall see for myself and my eyes shall behold." How this will be done we leave to Him who even now enables the invisible angels to see His invisible face (Mt 18:10) He tells us, "You will see God." We take Him at His Word.

The *visio Dei* is never used as a subject for speculation in the Scriptures. It is revealed to us as an encouragement in trials and an incentive to the continued pursuit of holiness. It is not explained to us. It is something promised to us at a time when we are still not capable of understanding it. The nature of the *Visio Dei* can only be known in the experience itself. All talk of it is inadequate. We can only say with the hymn writer :

Weak is the effort of my heart and cold my warmest thought.

But when I see Thee as Thou art, I'll praise Thee as I ought.

We wait in intense expectation of that glorious day.

The Scriptures list many other blessings which flow from being in the presence of God. We will enjoy freedom from every evil of body and soul, whether internal or external, temporal or eternal. Chiefly, we will be free from sin and all its results. There will be no more guilt, no more fear of punishment, no more temptation. Sin will be forever gone, not only by non-imputation, but by being completely rooted out of our nature. We will not suffer any of the evils which sin brought into the world, such as hunger, thirst, cold or heat, sickness or pain. We will be forever free death, both temporal and eternal. (Re 7: 16-17, 21:4, Lk 20:36, Ro 8:21, I Cor 15:54, II Th 1.7, He 12:23, I Jn 3:2.)

We will have continual and uninterrupted enjoyment of every kind of good. We will behold and share in the glory of Christ (Col 3:3 and Jn 17:24). We will enjoy the company of God, Christ, the angels, and all the saints. (He 12:22 -23) We will sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. (Mt 8:11). We will undoubtedly know each other by divine illumination, just as Adam knew Eve and Peter knew Moses and Elijah on the Mount. We will undoubtedly know our loved ones for I Thessalonians 4 holds up the day of Christ's return as a happy reunion. We look forward to this day of reunion, just as David hoped to see his son once more (II Sm 12:23) Very likely we will discuss the work of redemption as Moses and Elijah did on the Mountain of Transfiguration and sing praises and honor to God as the saints did in Revelation 5. We will enjoy a life of rest, but not idleness. Luther wrote:

I often think about it, but I cannot understand what we shall do to pass away the time, for there will be no change there, no labor, food, drink, and transactions. But I hold that in God we shall have enough to keep us occupied. Therefore Philip says very well, "Lord,

show us the Father and it sufficeth us.” John 14:8 God will be the most delightful object to contemplate.

Does the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus mean that we will know the damned in hell? I don’t know, but if it does, this knowledge will cause us no unhappiness because our will will be in complete harmony with God’s, and we will accept all His judgments as just.

When the image of God has been completely restored in us, we will live in perfect love for God and our neighbors.

We will enjoy security in a perfect home. Luther evidently believed that at least some material objects would be involved. ”I do believe that everything — water, trees, and grass — will become much more beautiful, and that there will be an entirely new earth as St. Peter says, so that it will be a joy to look at it. But God Himself will sustain soul and body, as He alone who is to be all in all.”

All these joys of heaven will be continuous, uninterrupted, and eternal. We have an inheritance which is incorruptible, undefiled, and which does not fade away. (I Pt 1:4)

In eternity there will be degrees of glory. (The term degrees of bliss is best avoided, because it implies some are happier than others in heaven.) In eternity all of the saved will enjoy God as their common source of joy. Their joy will have the same object, the same duration, the same continuity, and the same security. There will be no difference in the essential blessings of the saints, but only in supplementary rewards.

A difference of rewards which has relationship to a person’s service while on earth is taught in many passages of Scripture. (Mt 16:27, 25:21, Ro 2:6, I Cor 3:8, 13-15, II Cor 9:6, I Pe 1:17) Since even all our righteousness are as filthy rags, these are not rewards which are earned or merited, but these too, like salvation itself, are rewards of grace.

What do those rewards consist of? Perhaps they consist of places of honor in nearness to Christ. When James and John asked for positions of honor, Jesus did not say that no such places existed, but that it was His Father’s privilege to assign these places to those for whom they had been prepared. Perhaps these degrees of glory consist of difference of appearance. This may be implied in Daniel 12:3 – “They that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever.” As one “star differeth from another star in glory,” so it may be in the resurrection. Whatever these degrees of glory may be, they will not lead to envy in those who have less or self-righteous pride in those who have more. In the meanwhile, let us use the hope held before us as encouragement in faithful service to the Lord, who leaves no effort of his servants unrewarded, unworthy though they may be.

CONCLUSION

God did not reveal the Biblical doctrines of the resurrection of the flesh and the life everlasting so that we may debate in a theoretical way about the location of heaven, the beatific vision, and the properties of spiritual bodies. They are revealed so that we, as practical men, may meditate on the joys that await us. May we keep these joys before our eyes every day, indeed every hour, and every moment. May an eager anticipation of all that the Lord has prepared for us and loving awe at the greatness of His works keep us on the way that leads us to these joys and guard us against all that can exclude us from them. May we pray daily:

O sweet and blessed country, the home of God’s elect, O sweet and blessed country that eager hearts expect, Jesus in mercy bring us to that dear land of rest, Who are with God the Father and Spirit ever blessed. Amen.

FURTHER READING

** Hoenecke IV pp 239-252, 316-350

Pieper, III pp 534-539, 550-555

Triglotta p 30, 121

* Schmid, Doctrinal Theology of the Lutheran Church, Augsburg, 1875 pp 640-643, 660-663

* Baier, Compendium CPH pp 181-203, 241-250.

Plass, What Luther Says, II pp 618-625, 779-785, III p 1215-1219.

Sem Dogmatics Notes pp 118-120, 124-127.

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