

Our *Bodily* Hope

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Sickness and death are prominent in our experience. Yet, how rarely we speak of the new bodies God has promised his people. Indeed, on one occasion after hearing the American preacher D. James Kennedy mention the redemption of the body, a friend – who’s a member of a church known for its biblical teaching, and no ignoramus – asked me if I thought the idea is biblical. It is! But no matter how often we read of it in Scripture, very rarely do we draw comfort from God’s promise that He will give us new bodies. Given that one in three of us will at some point contract cancer, many others of us will suffer heart disease, and all experience, in the words of the historian Simon Schama, “the scythe of mortality” (“always busy, never fussy”), this is surely a truth worth grasping.

A Neglected Truth

Theologically speaking, the neglect of the body’s redemption is a by-product of the church’s longstanding indifference to the doctrine of adoption (Eph. 1:5; Rom. 9:4; Gal. 4:5; Rom. 8:15 and 23).¹ In Romans 8:23 Paul draws an indissoluble connection between the two doctrines, such that the neglect of the climax of adoption has inevitably resulted in the oversight of the deliverance of the body.

Spiritually speaking, the neglect of the body’s redemption may be attributed to the dualism we often tolerate between the body and the soul. For every professing Christian who puts the welfare of the body before that of the soul, there is another who hyper-spiritualises life as if it were all about the psyche. On this understanding, the body serves as but its carrier or vehicle. But this is not what Scripture teaches. In warning that bodily exercise profits a little, the apostle Paul implicitly

taught that physical fitness is beneficial nonetheless (1 Tim. 4:8). In noting Gaius’s spiritual prosperity, the apostle John also expressed concern for his bodily health (3 Jn 2). And yet, when it comes to our eternal existence, many of us contemplate only the wonders in store for our souls.

This is because many of us think of heaven just in terms of its intermediate state. That is, the paradise we enter at death: an ethereal state inhabited by spirits – God, angels, and the naked or disembodied souls of those already departed. The New Testament points us, however, to heaven in its grander final state, which is the product of God’s regeneration of the cosmos (Matt. 19:28) and the relocation of heaven to the new earth (Rev. 21:1-6). There the people of God shall live fully redeemed lives (in body and soul) in His immediate presence.

Practically speaking, our neglect of the body’s redemption is born of a reaction to the materialism of the age. Spurning society’s idolisation of the money-earning power of the body’s most curvaceous forms and exceptional abilities, some of us avoid the hype surrounding the models, actors, and sports personalities of the day, by focusing on the soul, as if that is all we are. The devil loves, however, to push biblical responses too far. He tricks us into thinking that the best defences against the spirit of the age are manmade. Yet, nowhere in Scripture are we called to ignore the corporeal nature of our existence, or to decry it. Neither are we to become the sorry souls who live their lives through the bodily achievements of others. In time God shall grant His people a bodily glory (enjoyed endlessly in our souls) that the beautiful and the best of this present earth can but dream of.

While we share unashamedly, then, with the world a longing for psychosomatic wholeness, we differ markedly in our attitude towards it. Whereas the Christian hankers after a new body that will first and foremost reveal God’s glory, the non-Christian clutches, pitifully, to the fading glory of his/her present body, only to observe the personal glory it has attracted dim with the passing of the years. Think of George Best, Frank Bruno, Paul Gascoigne, and a host of others, and you’ll see the point.

A Wonderful Prospect

When we mention the redemption of the body we declare, first, that God will raise our bodies from death. In our flesh, says Job, we

¹ I have traced this neglect at length in my doctoral dissertation “An Historical Study of the Doctrine of Adoption in the Calvinistic Tradition” (University of Edinburgh, 2001 [also housed at the library of Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia]).

shall “see God” (Job 19:26; cf. Ps. 16:9). As Westminster’s Larger Catechism (Ans. 86) puts it:

The communion in glory with Christ, which the members of the invisible church enjoy immediately after death, is, in that their souls are then made perfect in holiness, and received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, *waiting for the full redemption of their bodies*, which even in death continue united to Christ, and rest in their graves as in their beds, till at the last day they be again united to their souls.

Just as Christ was raised, so shall we be (1 Cor. 15:20, 23). Yet, resurrection entails more than a mere repeat experience of our present plane of life. Our bodies shall resemble our present identities (regardless of the age recaptured), and shall function much as they do now (capable of eating, drinking, touching, and being touched [Lk. 24:39]). Yet God shall adapt them to the perfect conditions of the new earth. In all likelihood then, we shall be able to appear and disappear (Lk. 24:31, 36), as did the resurrected Christ, and yet remain fully human.

Second, our bodies shall possess a glory appropriate to the splendour of the new earth (Phil. 3:20-21). The impaired and fading, but real, glory of our present bodies is nothing to the higher, undiminishing and perfect glory of our future bodies. All effects of the fall, whether direct (addictive abuses) or indirect (aging, wear and tear, sickness), shall be gone. Tears (excepting tears of joy) shall be history. Death, sorrow and pain shall be no more (Rev. 21:4). Our bodies shall not only know no corruption, bearing (ineradicably so) the image of Christ – the heavenly man, who neither sins nor dies – they shall be incapable of corruption (“incorruptible”). In perfect harmony with our souls, they shall reflect the immortality and perfect quality of life on the new earth (1 Cor. 15:52-54). Indeed, says Paul, no present suffering can compare in its pain with the joy of the glory to be revealed *in us* (Rom. 8:18)! Whatever our scarring now, it is the will of *Yahweh Rapha* (cf. Ex. 15:26) that we should be spiritual and physical beauties at the last.

Third, our redeemed bodies shall be free – fully so in the totality of our psychosomatic existence. No license shall spoil or enslave. Freely, we shall think God’s thoughts after him, and without mental reservation. Freely we shall converse, without trace of malice, gossip or misrepresentation. Freely we shall act without the endless frustrations of the present order. At every turn the liberated creation shall feed our perfect and unending desires to serve God (Rom. 8:20-21). Gone will be the desire for the escape of death or the inhibiting presence of its shadow. We shall have said “goodbye” to goodbyes, for heaven is the

Father’s never-ending family reunion. Ours shall be the freedom, in Christ and by the unfluctuating fullness of the Spirit, to enjoy Him and His redeemed creation forever.

A Welcome Tonic

As central as Christ is to our hope, surely we should make more of the fact that it is in our bodies that we’ll see Him most. Certainly, American caskets reflect this truth more than do our British coffins. Shaped and decorated like a bed, and often open for all to see, they express graphically the prospect of the body’s resurrection. What a tonic for our church’s invalids and emaciated, and their forlorn carers! Observing multiple sclerosis, cancer and then pneumonia assault the health of my father and deplete the physical resources of my mother, I have found it so. It was one night, alone and abroad, having heard of my father’s collapse, that the Lord pressed home to me its wonder. Meditating on Romans 8:22-23, I envisioned him with a new body, all contraptions now obsolete: the wheelchair, hoist, stairchair, tablets, and even glasses, hearing aids, and inhaler. As of yesteryear I could see his corpus obeying the commands of his mind and the desires of his heart to serve his Lord. Dad recovered, but the vision of his impediment-free future remains.

This teaching, we need to remember, is not just for Christians. Death lost its taboo in a Parisian tunnel in 1997. Westerners now talk freely of the afterlife. Mitch Albom’s best-seller *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, shares, for instance, the desire that heaven will resolve life’s conundra and be as tangible as is this earth. Middle Eastern suicide bombers daily expend their lives for the reward of seventy virgins. The caricature of a heaven filled with sublime light, clouds, winged angels, and harps, has taken a hit. God is calling us to appropriate more fully His vision of a redeemed creation, and to utilise more adeptly the kernels of truth about heaven found in contemporary views. We possess in common with humanity a desire for psychosomatic health (let’s not kid ourselves otherwise). Dare we hold back then, how in Christ it can be obtained? God holds out to the penitent and believing not the possibility of eternally existing as naked souls, but a *full* redemption, as corporeal as it is spiritual.