



# On Believing

A Collection of Meditations  
Curated by Art House Dallas



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# Resurrection

*“If the God who revealed life to us, and whose only desire is to bring us to life, loved us so much that he wanted to experience with us the total absurdity of death, then—yes, then there must be hope; then there must be something more than death; then there must be a promise that is not fulfilled in our short existence in this world; then leaving behind the ones you love, the flowers and the trees, the mountains and the oceans, the beauty of art and music, and all the exuberant gifts of life cannot be just the destruction and cruel end of all things; then indeed we have to wait for the third day.”*

—Henri Nouwen

*A Letter of Consolation*

# The Redemption of Our Bodies

by N.T. Wright

## **Rethinking Resurrection Today: Who, Where, What, Why, When, and How**

Who will be raised from the dead? All people, according to John and perhaps Paul, but for Paul at least there is a special sense of resurrection that clearly applies to those who are in Christ and indwelt by the Spirit. This raises other questions that we shall have to address in the next chapter.

Where will the resurrection take place? On the new earth, joined as it will then be to the new heaven. That has been the burden of my song in the shape and argument of this whole part of the book. In this new world there will be no problem of overcrowding (as some, at the risk of bathos, have ventured to suggest). Apart from the question of whether every human will be raised or only some, we need to remind ourselves that at least 5% of humans who have ever lived are alive at the moment. World population has grown at an enormous rate in the last century; we easily forget that for much of history huge tracts of land were hardly inhabited at all. Even the civilized and somewhat crowded cities of biblical times were mostly, by today's standards, like small market towns. In any case, if we take seriously the promise of new heavens and new earth, none of this is a problem. God is the creator, and his new world will be exactly what we need and want, with the love and beauty of this present world taken up and transformed.

More fully, then, what precisely will the resurrection body be? Here I pay homage again to one of the few modern writers who has tried to help us with the task of *imagining* what the risen body might be like: C. S. Lewis. In a variety of places, but particularly in his remarkable book *The Great Divorce*, he manages to get us to envisage bodies that are more solid, more real, more substantial than our present ones. That is the task that 2 Corinthians in particular invites us to. These will be bodies of which the phrase “the weight of glory,” taken from that letter (4:17), will be seen, felt, and known to be appropriate

Further questions were asked in the ancient world at this point and often reemerge in contemporary discussion. Which of our present

characteristics, and indeed present blemishes, will be retained in the transformed physicality? When I taught a course on resurrection at Harvard in 1999, one of my students complained in her term paper that since she had never liked the shape of her nose she hoped she wouldn't have to put up with it in a future life as well. There is no way we can answer such questions. All we can surmise from the picture of Jesus's resurrection is that just as his wounds were still visible, not now as sources of pain and death but as signs of his victory, so the Christian's risen body will bear such marks of his or her loyalty to God's particular calling as are appropriate, not least where that has involved suffering.

In particular, this new body will be immortal. That is, it will have passed *beyond* death not just in the *temporal* sense (that it happens to have gone through a particular moment and event) but also in the *ontological* sense of no longer being subject to sickness, injury, decay, and death itself. None of these destructive forces will have any power over the new body. That indeed may be one of the ways of understanding the *strangeness* of the risen body of Jesus. The disciples were looking at the first, and so far the only, piece of incorruptible physicality.

At this point we must notice that once again our language gets us into trouble. The word *immortality* is often used to mean "*disembodied* immortality," and it is sometimes then used in a sharp contrast with resurrection. As a result, we easily forget Paul's point about the resurrection body. It will be a body, but it will not be subject to mortality. An "immortal body" is something most people find so strange that they don't even pause to wonder if that's what Paul and the other early Christians were talking about. But it is.

There is a world of difference between this belief and a belief in an "immortal soul." Platonists believe that all humans have an immortal element within them, normally referred to as "soul." (Having praised C.S. Lewis, I should say that he seems to fall into this trap.) In the New Testament, however, immortality is something that only God possesses by nature and that he then shares, as a gift of grace rather than an innate possession, with his people.

Why will we be given new bodies? According to the early Christians, the purpose of this new body will be to rule wisely over God's new world. Forget those images about lounging around playing harps. There will be work to do and we shall relish doing it. All the skills and talents we have put to God's service in this present life — and perhaps too the interests and likings we gave up because they conflicted with our vocation — will be enhanced and ennobled and given back to us to be exercised to his glory. This is perhaps the most mysterious, and least explored, aspect of the resurrection life. But there are several promises in the New Testament about God's people "reigning,"

and these cannot just be empty words. If, as we have already seen, the biblical view of God's future is of the renewal of the entire cosmos, there will be plenty to be done, entire new projects to undertake. In terms of the vision of original creation in Genesis 1 and 2, the garden will need to be tended once more and the animals renamed. These are only images, of course, but like all other future — oriented language they serve as true signposts to a larger reality—a reality to which most Christians give little or no thought.

The new body will be a gift of God's grace and love. However, there are several passages in the New Testament, not least in the words of Jesus himself, that speak of God's future blessings in terms of *reward* (a further answer, in other words, to the question why). Many Christians find this uncomfortable. We have been taught that we are justified by faith, not works, and, somehow, the very idea of being a Christian for what we will get out of it is distasteful.

But the image of reward in the New Testament doesn't work like that. It isn't a matter of calculation, of doing a difficult job in order to be paid a wage. It is much more like working at a friendship or a marriage in order to enjoy the other person's company more fully. It is more like practicing golf in order that we can go out on the course and hit the ball in the right direction. It is more like learning German or Greek so that we can read some of the great poets and philosophers who wrote in those languages. The "reward" is *organically connected to the activity*, not some arbitrary pat on the back, otherwise unrelated to the work that was done. And it is always far in abundance beyond any sense of direct or equivalent payment. The reward of being able to read and enjoy Homer for the rest of your life is way beyond any kind of one-for-one payment for the slog of learning Greek. As we have already seen and shall pick up again later, all this relates directly to what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:58: the resurrection means that what you do in the present, in working hard for the gospel, is not wasted. It is not in vain. It will be completed, will have its fulfillment, in God's future.

When will the resurrection happen? Some have supposed that we go immediately upon death into the resurrection state. I find that very difficult. Paul says that if Christ is the firstfruits, those who belong to him will be raised "at his coming," which clearly hasn't happened yet. The book of Revelation speaks, as do many Jewish writings of the period, of the dead waiting patiently, and sometimes not so patiently, for the time when they will finally be raised to new life. This intermediate state, in fact, is more or less a constant feature of resurrection belief both Jewish and Christian.

In particular, if it is true (as I argued earlier) that the new creation will be in important senses continuous with the present one, we cannot think that it has already arrived, any more than it would have made sense for Jesus's

resurrection body to be already alive and active before his crucifixion. The new is the *transformation*, not merely the replacement, of the old. And since the old is quite obviously not yet transformed, the resurrection, its central feature, cannot yet have happened. Time matters; it was part of the original good creation. Though it may well itself be transformed in ways we cannot at present even begin to imagine, we should not allow ourselves to be seduced by the language of eternity (as in the phrase “eternal life,” which in the New Testament regularly refers not to a nontemporal future existence but to “the life of the coming age”) into imagining, as one old song puts it, that “time shall be no more.” No: “the old field of space, time, matter and the senses is to be weeded, dug, and sown for a new crop. We may be tired of that old field: God is not.”

How will it happen? As John Polkinghorne and others have urged, what we are talking about is a great act of new creation. Polkinghorne, in fact, offers a contemporary metaphor that I find appealing (but that, I have discovered, some people find appalling). He, of course, puts it in a much more nuanced way, but I don’t think it’s too much of a caricature to express it like this: God will download our software onto his hardware until the time when he gives us new hardware to run the software again. Paul says that God will give us new bodies; there may well be some bodily continuity, as with Jesus himself, but God is well capable of recreating people even if (as with the martyrs of Lyons) their ashes are scattered into a fast-flowing river.

Whenever the question of “how” is raised in the early Christian writings, the answer comes back: by the Spirit. The Spirit who brooded over the waters of chaos, the Spirit who indwelt Jesus so richly that it became known as the Spirit *of* Jesus: this Spirit, already present within Jesus’s followers as the firstfruits, the down payment, the guarantee of what is to come, is not only the beginning of the future life, even in the present time, but also the energizing power through which the final transformation will take place. The early creed spoke of “the Holy Spirit, the Lord and *giver of life*.” That is exactly true to the New Testament.

All this raises in an acute form the question: so where are the dead right now? How should we think of them?

## Let's Remake the World with Words

by Gregory Orr

Let's remake the world with words.  
Not frivolously, nor  
To hide from what we fear,  
But with a purpose.

Let's,  
As Wordsworth said, remove  
"The dust of custom" so things  
Shine again, each object arrayed  
In its robe of original light.

And then we'll see the world  
As if for the first time,  
As once we gazed at the beloved  
Who was gazing at us.

*Gregory Orr, ["Let's remake the world with words"] from How Beautiful the Beloved. Copyright © 2009 by Gregory Orr. Reprinted with the permission of The Permissions Company, LLC on behalf of Copper Canyon Press, coppercanyonpress.org.*





*Riven Tree* by Bruce Herman

*Oil and alkyd resin on wood with 23kt gold, platinum, and silver leaf.*

135" x 60"

2016

### 1 Corinthians 15:54–58

“When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

*‘Death is swallowed up in victory.*

*O death, where is your victory?*

*O death, where is your sting?’*

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”

## A Prayer of Response

*Almighty God, who for our redemption gave your only-begotten Son to the death of the cross, and by his glorious resurrection delivered us from the power of our enemy: Grant us so to die daily to sin, that we may evermore live with him in the joy of his resurrection; through Jesus Christ your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.*



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