

On the resurrection of the Dead

by John Wesley (1732)

"But some man will say, how are the dead raised up? and with what body do they come?" - 1 Cor. 15:35.

The Apostle having, in the beginning of this chapter, firmly settled the truth of our Saviour's resurrection, adds, "Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you, that there is no resurrection of the dead?" It cannot now any longer seem impossible to you that God should raise the dead; since you have so plain an example of it in our Lord, who was dead and is alive; and the same power which raised Christ must also be able to quicken our mortal bodies.

"But some man will say, How are the dead raised up? And with what body do they come?" How can these things be? How is it possible that these bodies should be raised again, and joined to their several souls, which many thousands of years ago were either buried in the earth, or swallowed up in the sea, or devoured by fire? -- which have mouldered into the finest dust, --that dust scattered over the face of the earth, dispersed as far as the heavens are wide; -- nay, which has undergone ten thousand changes, has fattened the earth, become the food of other creatures, and these again the food of other men? How is it possible that all these little parts, which made up the body of Abraham, should be again ranged together, and, unmixed with the dust of other bodies, be all placed in the same order and posture that they were before, so as to make up the very self-same body which his soul at his death forsook? Ezekiel was indeed, in a vision, set down in a valley full of dry bones, "and he heard a noise, and behold a shaking, and the bones came together, bone to his bone; the sinews and the flesh came upon them, and the skin covered them above, and breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet." This might be in a vision. But that all this, and much more, should in time come to pass; that our bones, after they are crumbled into dust, should really become living men; that all the little parts whereof our bodies were made, should immediately, at a general summons, meet again, and every one challenge and possess its own place, till at last the whole be perfectly rebuilt; that this, I say, should be done, is so incredible a thing, that we cannot so much as have any notion of it. And we may observe, that the Gentiles were most displeas'd with this article of the Christian faith; it was one of the last things the Heathens believed; and it is to this day the chief objection to Christianity, "How are the dead raised up? With what body do they come?" In my discourse on these words, I shall do three things: --

I. I shall show, that the resurrection of the self-same body that died and was buried, contains nothing in it incredible or impossible.

II. I shall describe the difference which the Scripture makes between the qualities of a glorified and a mortal body.

III. I shall draw some inferences from the whole.

I. I shall show, that the resurrection of the self-same body that died, contains nothing in it incredible or impossible.

But before I do this, it may be proper to mention some of the reasons upon which this article of our faith is built.

And, 1. The plain notion of a resurrection requires, that the self-same body that died should rise again. Nothing can be said to be raised again, but that very body that died. If God give to our souls at the last day a new body, this cannot be called the resurrection of our body; because that word plainly implies the fresh production of what was before.

2. There are many places of Scripture that plainly declare it. St. Paul, in the 53d verse of this chapter, tells us that "this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality." [1 Cor. 15:53] Now, by this

mortal, and this corruptible, can only be meant, that body which we now carry about with us, and shall one day lay down in the dust.

The mention which the Scripture makes of the places where the dead shall rise, further shows, that the same body which died shall rise. Thus we read in Daniel: "Those that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake; some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt." And, we may likewise observe, that the very phrase, of sleep and awake, implies, that when we rise again from the dead, our bodies will be as much the same as they are when we awake from sleep. Thus, again, our Lord affirms, (John 5:28, 29,) "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 to the resurrection of life, and they that have done evil to the resurrection of damnation." Now, if the same body do not rise again, what need is there of opening the graves at the end of the world? The graves can give up no bodies but those which were laid in them. If we were not to rise with the very same bodies that died, then they might rest for ever. To this we need only add that of St. Paul: "The Lord shall change this vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body. Now, this vile body can be no other than that with which we are now clothed, which must be restored to life again.

That in all this there is nothing incredible or impossible, I shall show by proving these three things: -- 1. That it is possible for God to keep and preserve unmixed, from all other bodies, the particular dust into which our several bodies are dissolved, and can gather and join it again, how far soever dispersed asunder. 2. That God can form that dust so gathered together, into the same body as it was before. 3. That when he hath formed this body, he can enliven it with the same soul that before inhabited it.

1. God can distinguish and keep unmixed from all other bodies the particular dust into which our several bodies are dissolved, and can gather it together and join it again, how far soever dispersed asunder. God is infinite both in knowledge and power. He knoweth the number of the stars, and calleth them all by their names; he can tell the number of the sands on the sea-shore: And is it at all incredible, that He should distinctly know the several particles of dust into which the bodies of men are mouldered, and plainly discern to whom they belong, and the various changes they have undergone? Why should it be thought strange, that He, who at the first formed us, whose eyes saw our substance yet being imperfect, from whom we were not hid when we were made in secret, and curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth, should know every part of our bodies, and every particle of dust whereof we were composed? The artist knows every part of the watch which he frames; and if it should fall in pieces, and the various parts of it lie in the greatest disorder and confusion, yet he can soon gather them together, and as easily distinguish one from another, as if every one had its particular mark. He knows the use of each, and can readily give it its proper place, and put them all exactly in the same figure and order they were before. And can we think that the Almighty Builder of the world, whose workmanship we are, does not know whereof we are made, or is not acquainted with the several parts of which this earthly tabernacle is composed? All these lay in one vast heap at the creation, till he separated them one from another, and framed them into those distinct bodies whereof this beautiful world consists. And why may not the same Power collect the ruins of our corrupted bodies, and restore them to their former condition? All the parts into which men's bodies are dissolved, however they seem to us carelessly scattered over the face of the earth, are yet carefully laid up by God's wise disposal till the day of the restoration of all things. They are preserved in the waters and fires, in the birds and beasts, till the last trumpet shall summon them to their former habitation.

"But," say they, "it may sometimes happen that several men's bodies may consist of the self-same matter. For the bodies of men are often devoured by other animals, which are eaten by other men. Nay, there are nations which feed upon human flesh; consequently, they borrow a great part of their bodies from other men. And if that which was part of one man's body becomes afterwards part of another man's, how can both rise at the last day with the same bodies they had before?" To this it may easily be replied, that a very small part of what is eaten turns to nourishment, the far greater part goes away according to the order of nature. So that it is not at all impossible for God, who watches over and governs all this, so to order things, that what is part of one man's body, though eaten by another, shall never turn to his nourishment; or, if it does, that it shall wear off again, and, some time before his

death, be separated from him, so that it may remain in a capacity of being restored at the last day to its former owner.

2. God can form this dust, so gathered together, into the same body it was before. And that it is possible, all must own who believe that God made Adam out of the dust of the earth. Therefore, the bodies of men being dust after death, it is no other than it was before; and the same power that at the first made it of dust, may as easily re-make it, when it is turned into dust again. Nay, it is no more wonderful than the forming a human body in the womb, which is a thing we have daily experience of; and is doubtless as strange an instance of divine power as the resurrection of it can possibly be. And were it not so common a thing, we should be as hardly brought to think it possible that such a beautiful fabric as the body of man is, with nerves and bones, flesh and veins, blood, and the several other parts whereof it consists, should be formed as we know it is; as now we are, that hereafter it should be rebuilt when it has been crumbled into dust. Had we only heard of the wonderful production of the bodies of men, we should have been as ready to ask, "How are men made, and with what bodies are they born?" as now, when we hear of the resurrection, "How are the dead raised up, and with what bodies do they come?"

3. When God hath raised this body, he can enliven it with the same soul that inhabited it before. And his we cannot pretend to say is impossible to be done; for it has been done already. Our Saviour himself was dead, rose again, and appeared alive to his disciples and others, who had lived with him many years, and were then fully convinced that he was the same person they had seen die upon the cross.

Thus have I shown that the resurrection of the same body is by no means impossible to God; that what he hath promised he is able also to perform, by that "mighty power by which he is able to subdue all things to himself." Though, therefore, we cannot exactly tell the manner how it shall be done, yet this ought not in the least to weaken our belief of this important article of our faith. It is enough, that He to whom all things are possible hath passed his word that he will raise us again. Let those who presume to mock at the glorious hope of all good men, and are constantly raising objections against it, first try their skill upon the various appearances of nature. Let them explain everything which they see happen in this world, before they talk of the difficulties of explaining the resurrection. Can they tell me how their own bodies were fashioned and curiously wrought? Can they give me a plain account, by what orderly steps this glorious stately structure, which discovers so much workmanship and rare contrivance, was at first created? How was the first drop of blood made; and how came the heart, and veins, and arteries to receive it? Of what, and by what means, were the nerves and fibres made? What fixed the little springs in their due places, and fitted them for the several uses for which they now serve? How was the brain distinguished from the other parts of the body, and filled with spirits to move and animate the whole? How came the body to be fenced with bones and sinews, to be clothed with skin and flesh, distinguished into various muscles? Let them but answer these few questions about the mechanism of our own bodies, and I will answer all the difficulties concerning the resurrection of them. But if they cannot do this without having recourse to the infinite power and wisdom of the FIRST CAUSE, let them know that the same power and wisdom can re-animate it, after it is turned into dust; and that there is no reason for our doubting concerning the thing because there are some circumstances belonging to it which we cannot perfectly comprehend or give a distinct account of.

II. I now proceed to the Second thing I proposed; which was, to describe the difference the Scripture makes between the qualities of a mortal and of a glorified body.

The change which shall be made in our bodies at the resurrection, according to the Scripture account, will consist chiefly in these four things: -- 1. That our bodies shall be raised immortal and incorruptible. 2. That they shall be raised in glory. 3. That they shall be raised in power. 4. That they shall be raised spiritual bodies.

1. The body that we shall have at the resurrection shall be immortal and incorruptible: "For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality." Now, these words, immortal and incorruptible, not only signify that we shall die no more, (for in that sense the damned are immortal and incorruptible,) but that we shall be perfectly free from all the bodily evils which sin brought into the world; that our bodies shall not be

subject to sickness, or pain, or any other inconveniences we are daily exposed to. This the Scripture calls "the redemption of our bodies," -- the freeing them from all their maladies. Were we to receive them again, subject to all the frailties and miseries which we are forced to wrestle with, I much doubt whether a wise man, were he left to his choice, would willingly take his again; -- whether he would not choose to let his still lie rotting in the grave, rather than to be again chained to such a cumbersome clod of earth. Such a resurrection would be, as a wise Heathen calls it, "a resurrection to another sheep." It would look more like a redemption to death again, than a resurrection to life.

The best thing we can say of this house of earth, is, that it is a ruinous building, and will not be long before it tumbles into dust; that it is not our home, -- we look for another "house, eternal in the heavens;" that we shall not always be confined here, but that in a little time we shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption, from this burden of flesh, into the glorious liberty of the sons of God. What frail things these bodies of ours are! How soon are they disordered! To what a troop of diseases, pains, and other infirmities are they constantly subject! And how does the least distemper disturb our minds, and make life itself a burden! Of how many parts do our bodies consist! and if one of these be disordered, the whole man suffers. If but one of these slender threads, whereof our flesh is made up be stretched beyond its due proportion, or fretted by any sharp humour, or broken, what torment does it create! Nay, when our bodies are at the best, what pains do we take to answer their necessities, to provide for their sustenance, to preserve them in health, and to keep them tenantable, in some tolerable fitness for our souls' use! And what time we can spare from our labour is taken up in rest, and refreshing our jaded bodies, and fitting them for work again. How are we forced, even naturally, into the confines of death; even to cease to be; -- at least to pass so many hours without any useful or reasonable thoughts, merely to keep them in repair! But our hope and comfort are, that we shall shortly be delivered from this burden of flesh: When "God shall wipe away all tears from our eyes, and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain; for the former things are passed away." O when shall we arrive at that happy hand where no complaints were ever heard, where we shall all enjoy uninterrupted health both of body and mind, and never more be exposed to any of those inconveniences that disturb our present pilgrimage. When we shall have once passed from death unto life, we shall be eased of all the troublesome care of our bodies, which now takes up so much of our time and thoughts. We shall be set, now undergo to support our lives. Yon robes of light, with which we shall be clothed at the resurrection of the just will not stand in need of those careful provisions which it is so troublesome to us here either to procure or to be without. But then, as our Lord tells us, those who shall be accounted worthy to obtain that world "neither marry nor are given in marriage, neither can they die any more, but they are equal to the angels." Their bodies are neither subject to disease, nor want that daily sustenance which these mortal bodies cannot be without. "Meats for the belly, and the belly for meats; but God will destroy both it and them." This is that perfect happiness which all good men shall enjoy in the other world, -- a mind free from all trouble and guilt, in a body free from all pains and diseases. Thus our mortal bodies shall be raised immortal. They shall not only be always preserved from death, (for so these might be, if God pleased,) but the nature of them shall be wholly changed, so that they shall not retain the same seeds of mortality; -- they cannot die any more.

2. Our bodies shall be raised in glory. "Then shall the righteous shine as the sun in the kingdom of their Father." A resemblance of this we have in the lustre of Moses's face, when he had conversed with God on the mount. His face shone so bright, that the children of Israel were afraid to come near him, till he threw a veil over it. And that extraordinary majesty of Stephen's face seemed to be an earnest of his glory. "All that sat in the council, looking steadfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel." How then, if it shone so gloriously even on earth, will it shine in the other world, when his, and the bodies of all the saints, are made like unto Christ's glorious body! How glorious the body of Christ is, we may guess from his transfiguration. St. Peter, when he saw this, when our Lord's face shone as the sun, and his raiment became shining and white as snow, was so transported with joy and admiration, that he knew not what he said. When our Saviour discovered but a little of that glory which he now possesses, and which in due time he will impart to his followers, yet that little of it made the place seem a paradise; and the disciples thought that they could wish for nothing better than always to live in such pure light, and enjoy so beautiful a sight. "It is good for us to be here: Let us make three tabernacles;" -- here let us fix our abode for ever. And if they thought it so happy only to be present with such heavenly bodies, and to

behold them with their eyes, how much happier must it be to dwell in such glorious mansions, and to be themselves clothed with so much brightness!

This excellency of our heavenly bodies will probably arise, in great measure, from the happiness of our souls. The unspeakable joy that we then shall feel will break through our bodies, and shine forth in our countenances; as the joy of the soul, even in this life, has some influence upon the countenance, by rendering it more open and cheerful: So Solomon tells us, "A man's wisdom makes his face to shine." Virtue, as it refines a man's heart, so it makes his very looks more cheerful and lively.

3. Our bodies shall be raised in power. This expresses the sprightliness of our heavenly bodies, the nimbleness of their motion, by which they shall be obedient and able instruments of the soul. In this state, our bodies are no better than clogs and fetters, which confine and restrain the freedom of the soul. The corruptible body presses down the soul, and the earthly tabernacle weighs down the mind. Our dull, sluggish, inactive bodies are often unable, or backward, to obey the commands of the soul. But in the other life, "they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; they shall walk, and not faint:" Or, as another expresses it, "they shall run to and fro like sparks among the stubble." The speed of their motion shall be like that of devouring fire in stubble; and the height of it, above the towering of an eagle; for they shall meet the Lord in the air when he comes to judgment, and mount up with him into the highest heaven. This earthly body is slow and heavy in all its motions, listless and soon tired with action. But our heavenly bodies shall be as fire; as active and as nimble as our thoughts are.

4. Our bodies shall be raised spiritual bodies. Our spirits are now forced to serve our bodies, and to attend their leisure, and do greatly depend upon them for most of their actions. But our bodies shall then wholly serve our spirits, and minister to them, and depend upon them. So that, as by "a natural body" we understand one fitted for this lower, sensible world for this earthly state; so "a spiritual body" is one that is suited to a spiritual state, to an invisible world, to the life of angels. And, indeed, this is the principal difference between a mortal and a glorified body. This flesh is the most dangerous enemy we have: We therefore deny and renounce it in our baptism. It constantly tempts us to evil. Every sense is a snare to us. All its lusts and appetites are inordinate. It is ungovernable, and often rebels against reason. The law in our members wars against the law of our mind. When the spirit is willing, the flesh is weak; so that the best of men are forced to keep it under, and use it hardly, lest it should betray them into folly and misery. And how does it hinder us in all our devotions! How soon does it jade our minds when employed on holy things! How easily, by its enchanting pleasures, does it divert them from those noble exercises! But when we have obtained the resurrection unto life, our bodies will be spiritualized, purified, and refined from their earthly grossness; then they will be fit instruments for the soul in all its divine and heavenly employment; we shall not be weary of singing praises to God through infinite ages.

Thus, after what little we have been able to conceive of it, it sufficiently appears, that a glorified body is infinitely more excellent and desirable than this vile body. The only thing that remains is,

III. To draw some inferences from the whole. And, First, from what has been said, we may learn the best way of preparing ourselves to live in those heavenly bodies; which is, by cleansing ourselves more and more from all earthly affections, and weaning ourselves from this body, and all the pleasures that are peculiar to it. We should begin in this life to loosen the knot between our souls and this mortal flesh; to refine our affections, and raise them from things below to things above; to take 'off our thoughts, and disengage them from present and sensible things, and accustom ourselves to think of, and converse with, things future and invisible; that so our souls, when they leave this earthly body, may be prepared for a spiritual one, as having beforehand tasted spiritual delights, and being in some degree acquainted with the things which we then shall meet with. A soul wholly taken up with this earthly body is not fit for the glorious mansions above. A sensual mind is so wedded to bodily pleasures, that it cannot enjoy itself without them; and it is not able to relish any other, though infinitely to be preferred before them. Nay, such as follow the inclinations of their fleshly appetites, are so far unfit for heavenly joys, that they would, esteem it the greatest unhappiness to be clothed with a spiritual body. It would be like clothing a beggar in

the robes of a king. Such glorious bodies would be uneasy to them, they would not know what to do in them, they would be glad to retire and put on their rags again. But when we are washed from the guilt of our sins, and cleansed from all filthiness of flesh and spirit, by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, then we shall long to be dissolved, and to be with our exalted Saviour; we shall be always ready to take wing for the other world, where we shall at last have a body suited to our spiritual appetites.

2. From hence we may see how to account for the different degrees of glory in the heavenly world. For although all the children of God shall have glorious bodies, yet the glory of them all shall not be equal. "As one star differeth from another star in glory, so also is the resurrection of the dead." They shall all shine as stars; but those who, by a constant diligence in well-doing, have attained to a higher measure of purity than others, shall shine more bright than others. They shall appear as more glorious stars. It is certain that the most heavenly bodies will be given to the most heavenly souls; so that this is no little encouragement to us to make the greatest progress we possibly can in the knowledge and love of God, since the more we are weaned from the things of the earth now, the more glorious will our bodies be at the resurrection.

3. Let this consideration engage us patiently to bear whatever troubles we may be exercised with in the present life. The time of our eternal redemption draweth nigh. Let us hold out a little longer, and all tears shall be wiped from our eyes, and we shall never sigh nor sorrow any more. And how soon shall we forget all we endured in this earthly tabernacle, when once we are clothed with that house which is from above! We are now but on our journey towards home, and so must expect to struggle with many difficulties; but it will not be long ere we come to our journey's end, and that will make amends for all. We shall then be in a quiet and safe harbour, out of the reach of all storms and dangers. We shall then be at home in our Father's house, no longer exposed to the inconveniences which, so long as we abide abroad in these tents, we are subject to. And let us not forfeit all this happiness, for want of a little more patience. Only let us hold out to the end, and we shall receive an abundant recompence for all the trouble and uneasiness of our passage which shall be endless rest and peace.

Let this especially, fortify us against the fear of death: It is now disarmed, and can do us no hurt. It divides us, indeed, from this body awhile; but it is only that we may receive it again more glorious. As God, therefore, said once to Jacob, "Fear not to go down into Egypt, for I will go down with thee, and will surely bring thee up again;" so may I say to all who are born of God, "Fear not to go down into the grave; lay down your heads in the dust; for God will certainly bring you up again, and that in a much more glorious manner." Only "be ye steadfast and unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord;" and then let death prevail over, and pull down, this house of clay; since God hath undertaken to rear it up again, infinitely more beautiful, strong, and useful.