

The Disappearance of Jesus' Body

Part 1: Biblical and Theological Considerations

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Abstract

This study investigates how Jesus' body disappeared from the tomb. In Part 1, which is this document, how Jesus' body disappeared from the tomb is considered from the Biblical references to his resurrection and from the theology of resurrection throughout the Bible. The perspective is that of Biblical Christianity. It is concluded that in the resurrection, Jesus' body underwent a basic transformation, a metamorphosis, from what Paul called a "natural body" to a "spiritual body". As described by the change in the adjective from "natural" to "spiritual", this basic transformation in Jesus' body is what allowed his body to exit the shroud and the tomb without disturbing either. Physical considerations related to how Jesus' body disappeared from the tomb are analyzed in Part 2.

Introduction

The importance of God's existence cannot be overstated; from its emphasis in "The Great Books of the Western World" to its foundational element in the rise of western civilization to the foundational documents of United States of America. When the United States' "Declaration of Independence" refers to "Nature's God" and says that "all men are created ... by their Creator" and that the authors of the declaration were "appealing to the Supreme Judge of the World ... with a firm Reliance on the Protection of divine Providence", they were not referring to the God of the Muslims, the Hindus, or any other non-Biblical religion. They were referring to the God of the Bible. This is made clear in our Constitution in the last paragraph in the dating of the document. There it says "in the Year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and Eighty seven". They dated the Constitution by giving the number of years since Jesus' birth, and calling Him "our Lord". The word "Lord" refers to God in the Old Testament, and when applied to Jesus refers to Jesus' deity, i.e. Jesus being God in the flesh. So in dating the Constitution, the authors referred to the deity of Jesus Christ, and then signed their names under it. But Christian belief in the deity of Jesus is predicated upon the truth of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. For as the Apostle Paul said "If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith" (1 Cor. 15:14). So, logically, if Jesus was not raised from the dead, then our common morality built on the Bible has no basis in truth, our legal system has no basis in absolute morality, and the foundation of the United States is false and thus potentially illegitimate. It all depends on whether Jesus was actually raised from the dead.

But in our culture, there are many that attack the resurrection of Christ; arguing that it never happened – that it is not a true historical event. This attack upon Christ's resurrection usually argues that Christ' resurrection violates the laws of science and is therefore impossible. But the "laws of science" are not static things. The laws of science, as they are currently defined, have a long history of development. And our understanding of the laws of science will undoubtedly change in the future as we learn more about the mysteries all around us. Part of the

problem is in defining a “miracle” as a “violation of natural law”, coupled with the belief that the laws of science are known with absolute certainty and perfection so that they can never change, so that a miracle in this sense is a logical impossibility. In this way, the skeptic does not need to prove that God does not exist; rather, the skeptic merely defines God out of existence. Defining a “miracle” as a “violation of natural law, as we currently understand science” would perhaps be better. But a Christian definition of a miracle would be “An event caused by God that causes awe in the beholder.” This definition of a miracle allows for God’s existence and for his working in the world. The Christian concept of the laws of nature has always been that God, as the creator and sustainer of the universe, operates on a much higher plane than we do, so that He is able to do what He wants to, without regard to the status of our understanding of the laws of nature, restricted only by his own character and the rules of logic. Thus, it is wise to take a position of humility regarding our current state of science and admit that there are probably many new concepts, principles, and theories that are yet to be discovered in science. This means that the eye-witness testimony of Jesus’ resurrection and post-resurrection appearances ought to be taken at face value, and thus recognize that these are real historical events. They ought not to be rejected just because they contradict our current understanding of science.

But after the importance of Jesus’ resurrection is discussed, and the possibility of Jesus’ resurrection is discussed, the same question remains: was Jesus actually raised from the dead? The evidence from Scripture clearly affirms that He did rise from the dead, and so in most people’s minds the question becomes how could this have happened? The discussion below focuses on only one aspect of this issue, and that is how Jesus’ body disappeared from the tomb in the resurrection. This issue will be discussed based on three areas of investigation: 1) the Biblical basis for the nature of Christ’s resurrection from the tomb, 2) the theological basis for resurrection throughout the Bible, and 3) the physical basis for how his body could have disappeared from the tomb in the resurrection. The first two of these (Biblical and theological considerations) are covered in Part 1 (this document) based on a belief that statements in the historical records (the Bible) regarding Jesus’ resurrection and post-resurrection appearances ought to be taken at face value as statements of eye-witness testimony. Physical/scientific considerations related to Jesus’ disappearance from the tomb are covered in Part 2.

Biblical Basis

When Jesus was crucified, a group of believing women was standing near the cross including Jesus’ mother Mary (John 19:25-27). Standing near them, near the cross, was the disciple whom Jesus loved, who is best identified as John (John 19:26-27, 35, Ref. 1). The rest of his followers, men as well as women, were standing off watching from a distance (Matt. 27:55, Luke 23:49). Of those who would later be called apostles, apparently only John was standing near the cross.

After Jesus died on the cross, Joseph of Arimathea went to Pilate to ask for the body of Jesus, which Pilate granted. Joseph then “took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and laid it in his own new tomb” (Matt. 27:57-60, Mark 15:43-46, Luke 23:50-53, John 19:38). He could not have done these things alone. Nicodemus helped with the burial and he brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes to apply to the body (John 19:39-40). Having stood near the cross

during the crucifixion, it seems very natural for John to also have been involved in the burial of Jesus in the tomb. If John was present in the tomb, it is likely that he was the only apostle to be there since the other apostles had fled or were maintaining their distance for fear of the authorities. The role of the women was evidently to watch the men take the body down, transport it from the cross to the tomb, take the body into the tomb, and do the burial (Matt. 27:61, Mark 15:47, Luke 23:55).

In Jewish culture, there were two phases involved in burial of a dead body. The first phase, or primary burial, consisted of wrapping the body in a sheet, placing it on a level area, or shelf, cut into a tomb, and leaving it there until the flesh has rotted away. After the flesh has rotted away, the secondary burial takes place. This involves someone going back into the tomb to place the remaining bones in a stone ossuary, or bone box. This stone box containing the bones is then placed into a niche cut into the wall inside the tomb. The Biblical description of the burial of Jesus' body refers to only the primary burial. There was no secondary burial of Jesus' body due to his resurrection.

After the resurrection, when John and Peter ran to the tomb, John arrived first (John 20:3-5). He bent down outside the tomb to see the linen wrappings inside the tomb. When Peter arrived at the tomb, he went in and saw the linen wrappings that had been around Jesus' body. He also saw the face cloth that had been around Jesus' head lying by itself (John 20:6-7). Then John went into the tomb and he also observed the linen wrappings and the face cloth. John says that when he went inside, "He saw and believed" (John 20:8). What did he believe? The other three times that the word "believe" is used in this chapter (John 20:25, 29, 31) all refer to believing in the bodily resurrection of Jesus. It is certainly best to understand that in John 20:8 John believed that Jesus had risen from the dead, for the context of the following verse makes it clear that John came to believe in the resurrection of Jesus' body even though he still did not understand that the prophecies in the Old Testament required that the Messiah "must rise again from the dead" (John 20:9).

But what did he see in the tomb that convinced him that Jesus had risen from the dead? What he saw in the tomb was the linen wrappings and the face cloth, but what was it about these items that allowed him to logically deduce that Jesus had risen from the dead? Though it is not stated in Scripture, a reasonable explanation can be made for what John saw regarding the linen wrappings that caused him to believe in Jesus' resurrection. John evidently knew how the linen was wrapped around Jesus' body, either from being in the tomb and watching others place the shroud around his body, or from wrapping the shroud around the body himself, or if he was not in the tomb, then from his knowledge of Jewish burial practices. So what John saw was that the linen wrappings had not been disturbed from what they ought to have been, except that there was no longer a body inside the shroud to support it. The linen wrappings had probably collapsed to a large degree, but not totally. The outline of Jesus' body might still have been present on the linen. No one had moved the linen wrappings back to steal or move the body. Jesus had not pushed the linen wrappings back to allow himself to get up and walk out of the tomb. When John saw the linen wrappings in their undisturbed partially collapsed condition probably with the outline of his body still present to a degree, he realized that no one had touched the linen wrappings. Jesus' body had simply disappeared from within the shroud. This led John to

logically deduce that Jesus' body could not have been moved or stolen, but rather John concluded that Jesus must have resurrected from the dead.

John came to believe in Jesus' resurrection based on what he saw in the tomb rather than Old Testament prophecies (John 20:9) or Jesus' predictions that He would be raised from the dead (Matt. 12:39-40, 16:4, 21, 17:23, 20:19, 26:32, 27: 40, 63, Mark 8:31, 9:9, Luke 9:22, 24:6-7, John 2:19-22) which the disciples did not yet understand. Initially, when Jesus had made these predictions of his death and resurrection, the disciples had not believed them in a literal sense because they expected the Messiah to be a conquering hero who would rescue Israel from her enemies, i.e. Rome. Jesus often taught in parables and other forms of figurative language, so his disciples hesitated to believe Jesus' predictions about his resurrection literally (Mark 9:9-10). They did not realize that Messiah coming as a conquering hero was to be fulfilled in Christ's second coming. Christ's first coming was to fulfill his role as the Lamb of God, the suffering servant who dies to pay for our sin as prophesied in Isaiah 52:13 to 53:12.

What do the commentaries say about the interpretation that it was the undisturbed collapsed condition of the burial shroud that caused John to believe that Jesus must have resurrected from the dead? Many commentaries do not discuss exactly what John saw that caused him to believe, but those that comment on it take this interpretation. Edwin A. Blum, professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, in "The Bible Knowledge Commentary" says that "John perceived that the missing body and the position of the grave clothes was not due to a robbery. He realized that Jesus had risen from the dead and had gone through the grave clothes" (Ref. 2). Merrill C. Tenney, past dean of the graduate school at Wheaton College, in "The Expositor's Bible Commentary" says that "The disciple saw the meaning of the empty graveclothes and 'believed.' The unique phenomenon of the graveclothes looking as if the body were in them when no body was there undoubtedly recalled Jesus' previous words (cf. John 2:22, 11:25, 16:22)" (Ref. 3). Warren W. Wiersbe, former pastor and prolific author of Christian literature, in his "Bible Exposition Commentary" wrote "What did they see in the tomb? The graveclothes lying on the stone shelf, still wrapped in the shape of the body (John 20:5-7). Jesus had passed through the graveclothes and left them behind as evidence that He was alive. They lay there like an empty cocoon. There was no sign of struggle, the graveclothes were not in disarray" (Ref. 4). John Phillips, radio Bible teacher for the Moody Bible Institute, said in his commentary on the book of John "Jesus had risen from the dead. He had risen right through the grave clothes. Of course! All the clues pointed to that conclusion. Then and there he believed. It was incredibly, gloriously true. Jesus was alive!" (Ref. 5) And William Barclay, Professor of Divinity and Biblical Criticism at the University of Glasgow, in his "Daily Study Bible Series" said "Then something else struck him – the grave-clothes were not disheveled and disarranged. They were lying there still in their folds – that is what the Greek means ... The whole point of the description is that the grave-clothes did not look as if they had been put off or taken off; they were lying there in their regular folds as if the body of Jesus had simply evaporated out of them. The sight suddenly penetrated to John's mind; he realized what had happened – and he believed. It was not what he had read in Scripture which convinced him that Jesus had risen; it was what he saw with his own eyes." (Ref. 6)

The New Testament has three other examples of Jesus' post-resurrection body either disappearing or reappearing in an instantaneous miraculous way. After his resurrection, on the

road north out of Jerusalem going toward Emmaus, Jesus came up and started walking next to two of his lesser known disciples (Luke 24:13-36). Though He walked and talked with them for quite a while, they did not recognize Him. The exact reason is not given except that “their eyes were prevented from recognizing Him” (Luke 24:16). Of course, Jesus was the last person that they would have expected to see, since they knew that He had been crucified. Possible other naturalistic reasons for their not recognizing Him could include poor lighting as the sun was going down, bad weather such as rain or fog, the use of head coverings to protect against bad weather, or the two disciples simply looking down as they walked along the road, perhaps with their eyes filled with tears. Jesus, though still recognizable, may have looked somewhat different in his post-resurrection body, perhaps more youthful. At any rate, they did not recognize Him until they arrived in Emmaus and He reclined with them at the table. When He took the bread and blessed it in his characteristic manner, and “breaking it, He began giving it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized Him; and He vanished from their sight” (Luke 24:30-31, NASB, i.e. New American Standard Bible). Perhaps they recognized him when they first saw the nail prints in his hands, i.e. wrists, when He broke the bread and offered it to them.

The Greek word translated “vanished” in Luke 24:31 in the NASB is ἀφαντος (athantos). In “The NASB Interlinear Greek-English New Testament” by Alfred Marshall, his literal translation for this passage is “and He invisible became from them” so that “athantos” is literally translated as “invisible”. The various other translations translate it as either “vanished” or “disappeared”:

- “He vanished out of their sight.” (KJV, RSV)
- “He vanished from their sight.” (NASB, ESV, NBV, NEB, REB, Phillips, Wuest)
- “He had vanished from their sight.” (NJB)
- “He vanished from them.” (Williams, Beck)
- “And He vanished (departed invisibly).” (Amplified)
- “He disappeared from their sight.” (NIV, TEV)
- “At that moment he disappeared.” (NLT, TLB)
- “When they saw who he was, he disappeared.” (NCV, Expanded)
- “And then he disappeared.” (Message)
- “but He disappeared.” (CEV)

The meaning of this text should be clear. He did not walk swiftly out of the room so as to vanish in the night. If John had wanted to say this, he certainly could have, but he didn't. Jesus simply vanished/disappeared while they were looking straight at Him. It is important to take this at face value in order to properly understand the nature of Jesus' resurrection body.

On two other instances, Jesus reappeared in a miraculous manner; once to the ten disciples (John 20:19, Luke 24:36-37) with Thomas missing, and once to all eleven remaining disciples (John 20:26) with Thomas present. In both cases, the disciples were gathered together in a room, perhaps the same room in which they had shared the last supper with Jesus. The doors were “shut” (John 20:19, 26, NASB) in the sense of being “locked” (John 20:19, 26, NIV, i.e. New International Version) for fear of the authorities who might be looking for them. In both cases, Jesus simply appeared in the midst of them without coming through any entrance into the room.

By looking closely at these four occurrences of the disappearance or reappearance of Jesus' body, several things can be learned.

1. His post-resurrection body had the capability to disappear or reappear without interacting with the atoms surrounding it. He did not need to move the top of the shroud in order to exit from the shroud (John 20:8). The walls and locked doors of the room where the disciples were meeting did not prevent Him from appearing in the middle of his disciples (John 20:19, 26).
2. The disappearance or reappearance of Jesus' body could be essentially instantaneous. (Luke 24:31, John 20:19, 26)
3. They recognized him (Luke 24:31) to be Jesus. He showed them his hands and his feet (Luke 24:39) as well as his side (John 20:20, 27) where the wounds from his crucifixion could still be seen.
4. Jesus was definitely there in a physical body with flesh and bones, so that He could interact physically with his surroundings. He was not a ghost or a spirit. He told them this (Luke 24:39) and He proved it by inviting them to touch Him and by eating a piece of fish in their presence. (John 20:27, Luke 24:37-43)
5. He had continuity of memory with the time period prior to his crucifixion and resurrection, because He repeated what He had told them while He was with them prior to his death. (Luke 24:44)

The next step in understanding Jesus' disappearances and reappearances after his resurrection is through a systematic study of what the entire Bible teaches about the nature of resurrection. For this, we turn to the study of systematic theology.

Theological Basis

In this section, we will investigate the nature of Jesus' resurrection body from the larger perspective on resurrection as taught in the entire Bible. This involves definitions, a brief defense of resurrection, comparison of resurrection for the righteous versus the ungodly, the necessity of the soul continuing to exist beyond the death of the body, and application of the resurrection body of the righteous to the resurrection body of Jesus.

The reference to the "righteous" as used above is not referring to those who have never sinned, for no one is righteous in this sense (Psalm 143:2, Eccles. 7:20, Rom. 3:10) for Scripture says that all have committed sin (1 Kings 8:46, Is. 59:2, 64:6, Rom. 3:23, 1 John 1:8). The "righteous" as used here refers in a general sense to those who have had their sins forgiven by being declared righteous, i.e. credited with righteousness, by God as a result of responding in faith to God's revelation to them (Gen. 15:6, Rom. 4:3, 9, Gal. 3:6). Specifically, in the New Testament sense, the righteous are those who have been saved as a result of trusting in Christ's death on the cross to pay for their sin (John 3:16, 20:31, Rom. 3:19-28, Gal. 2:16, Eph. 2:8-10). For the purpose here, the terms "the righteous" and "the saved" will be used interchangeably.

The reference to the “ungodly”, as used here, does not refer to those who have committed a certain degree of wickedness but rather refers to those that are without God in the sense of not being among the righteous as defined above. So at any point in time, every individual will either be in the class of the righteous or in the class of the ungodly, for either God will have credited righteousness to the individual or He will not have.

In Jewish culture and literature, the concept of resurrection only applies to a person’s body; it is the person’s body that is brought back to life (Job 19:25-27, NIV), though changed as discussed below. The concept of resurrection never applies to the person’s soul. The person’s soul is not what is brought back to life in the resurrection because the person’s soul does not cease to exist, or go into a state of soul sleep, at the death of the body. For example, the Sadducees, when they tried to trap Jesus regarding his teaching about the resurrection (Matt. 22:23-33) based their argument on the bodily resurrection of a woman who was the wife of seven brothers, one after the other. Their argument makes no sense if the resurrection only applies to their souls coming back to life.

In this example, when the Sadducees, who rejected belief in bodily resurrection, tried to trap Jesus regarding his teaching that people would be bodily raised from the dead (Matt. 22:23-33), Jesus told them “You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God” (Matt. 22:29). If we fully realized “the power of God”, then we would reason as Abraham did that “God could even raise the dead” (Gen. 22:5, Heb. 11:19). Paul said that the person who believes that human beings can not be raised from the dead must logically also deny that Jesus was raised from the dead. Paul then said that for such a person “your faith is futile, you are still in your sins” (1 Cor. 15:12-19). The Bible teaches that not only has Jesus been raised from the dead, but that all will be raised from the dead for judgment by God (Matt. 16:27, Acts 10:42, Rom. 14:10-12, 2 Cor. 5:10). Both the righteous (Is. 26:19, John 6:39, 40, 44, 54, 11:23-26, Rom. 8:11, 1 Cor. 6:14, 2 Cor. 4:14, Phil. 3:10-11) and the ungodly will be raised (Dan. 12:1-2, John 5:26-29, Acts 24:15) at their appointed times (1 Cor. 15:22-23, 1 Thess. 4:14-17, Rev. 20:4-6, 11-15). For each human being, this resurrection is accomplished by each individual’s soul being reunited with a resurrected form of his physical body. The purpose of this resurrection for the righteous is for the distribution of rewards for works done out of love for and faith in our savior (Dan. 12:13, Luke 14:13-14, 1 Cor. 3:11-15, 4:5). The purpose of this resurrection for the ungodly is for assigning punishment for ungodly works done out of selfish motives in rejection of our savior (Mt. 25:31-46, Rom. 2:14-16, Rev. 20:11-15).

The nature of the resurrection body, at least for the righteous, is the same as the resurrection body of Jesus. This is suggested in Rom. 8:29, 1 Cor. 15:49 and 1 John 3:2, but Paul clearly states this point in Phil. 3:20-21 by saying “... the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.” In this verse, “our lowly bodies” refers to our present bodies that are to be transformed to be like his “glorious body”, which refers to Jesus’ resurrection body. Paul also makes this clear by calling Jesus the “first fruits” of those who would be later resurrected (1 Cor. 15:20-23). In these verses Paul draws on a comparison that would be easily understood in their agrarian culture. If you go up to a tree and pluck off the very first fruit and taste it, you will be able to determine what all the rest of the fruit will be like from that tree because all the subsequent fruit will have the same nature as the first fruit. For example,

if you determine that the first fruit is an apple, then all the rest of the fruit from that tree will also be apples. And conversely, the nature of the first fruit will be the same as the subsequent fruit. Thus, we can understand the nature of Jesus' resurrection body by understanding the nature of the resurrection bodies of the righteous that will be later resurrected. Jesus' resurrection body will have the same nature as their resurrection bodies.

Much is said in the Bible about the resurrection bodies of those who will be resurrected at Christ's coming. The phrases "post-resurrection body" and "resurrection body" are not used in Scripture. Paul uses several other adjectives to describe the bodies of those who are resurrected, but in all cases, the noun remains the same - it is still a "body". As with Jesus' resurrection body, it will still be recognizable, touchable, and able to interact with its surroundings when in this world because it is a physical body with flesh and bones (Luke 24:39), but the nature of this future resurrection body is not the same as the physical bodies that we currently have. It will undergo a basic transformation, a metamorphosis as described by the new adjectives used by Paul. Consider the central passage on this issue, 1 Cor. 15:35-54, from the NIV:

³⁵ How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come? ... ³⁶ What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. ³⁷ When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed ... ³⁸ But God gives it a body as he has determined ... ⁴² So it will be in the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; ⁴³ it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; ⁴⁴ it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. ... ⁴⁶ The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual. ... ⁴⁹ And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man. ⁵⁰ I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. ⁵¹ Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed— ⁵² in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. ⁵³ For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. ⁵⁴ When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."

It should be noted that this passage was written to the believers in Corinth, so it has application to the resurrection bodies of the righteous. And in verse 51 when it says that "We shall not all sleep", it is not teaching "soul sleep" but is merely using "sleep" as a euphemism for the death of the body, because, as in sleep, the body will awaken again in the resurrection. It is saying that when Christ returns, the saved who are then alive will receive their resurrection bodies even though they are still alive. This is confirmed in 1 Thess. 4:14-17:

¹⁴ For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. ¹⁵ According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call

of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.

This passage teaches that when Christ returns in his second coming, He will bring with Him the souls of those who have already died (“fallen asleep”) while trusting in Him for salvation. We who are still alive on the earth at Christ’s second coming will not receive our resurrection bodies before (“not precede”) those who have already died (“fallen asleep”), for those who have died trusting “in Christ will rise first”, i.e. their souls that Jesus brings with Him at his second coming will be reunited with their resurrected bodies first, i.e. prior to those still alive on the earth. “After that” those living believers on the earth will also receive their resurrection bodies when they are “caught up together with them” already “in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.” The context of 1 Thess. 4:14-17 is the issue of when the believers, both dead and living, will receive their resurrection bodies. In this passage, Paul tells the believers in Thessalonica that they don’t have to be concerned about believers that have already died not being resurrected from the dead, in fact they will receive their resurrection bodies slightly before those who are still alive on the earth at Christ’s second coming. The event referred to in 1 Thess. 4:17 when the believers that are alive when Christ returns are “caught up ... to meet the Lord in the air” “in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye” (1 Cor. 15:52) is called the translation or rapture of the church.

While it is clear that the ungodly will also be resurrected at the appropriate time, the nature of the bodies received by the ungodly in their resurrection is not described in Scripture. Lewis Sperry Chafer, past president of Dallas Theological Seminary said in his 8 volume “Systematic Theology” that “With respect to the nature of the resurrection body of the unsaved in which they “stand” before the great white throne (Rev. 20:12), little may be determined. There can be no doubt about the fact of their resurrection at the time and place divinely appointed”. (Ref. 7)

For clarity, the descriptions used in the above passage (1 Cor. 15:35-54) for the resurrection bodies of the righteous are compared in Table 1:

Table 1. Comparison of the Dead from 1 Cor. 15:35-54

How the Dead are Buried	How the Dead are Raised
As a seed that dies to give birth to the plant that follows	With a body that results from the body that was buried, but with its nature changed as determined by God
Perishable	Imperishable
In dishonor	In glory
In weakness	In power
As a natural body	As a spiritual body
In mortality	In immortality

According to this passage, when the righteous are raised to life in the resurrection, they will be given a body, as determined by God, that is a spiritual body as opposed to the previous natural body. This is the essential difference, and the other characteristics flow from it. Notice that the text does not say that those that are raised in the resurrection will be raised as a spirit. If it said this, it would mean that they would be raised without a body of flesh and bones according to Luke 24:39. Rather, 1 Cor. 15:35-54 affirms that they will be raised with a body, which must include flesh and bones according to Luke 24:39. But the adjective is changed from “natural” to “spiritual”. This transition from a natural body to a spiritual body at the resurrection is what Paul calls “the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8:23) so that “if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands” (2 Cor. 5:1). In this verse, the “earthly tent” refers to our present natural bodies, and the “building from God” refers to our future spiritual bodies.

According to 1 Cor. 15:35-54, when a person dies the body that is buried is described as a natural body. The adjective “natural” means that his body operates according to natural things or principles – the principles of nature. We call these principles the laws of nature, such as the laws of physics, chemistry, genetics, etc. That is why his natural body is mortal, perishable, and relatively weak and dishonorable. But when a person receives his resurrection body, the body is described as a spiritual body. So what Paul refers to as a “spiritual body” is still a physical body; having the characteristics of a physical body such as weight and volume, and it would still be able to interact with its surroundings so that, for example, it could eat food and be felt by others; but there is a basic change in the nature of the physical body because the adjective has changed from “natural” to “spiritual”. The adjective “spiritual” means that his body operates according to spiritual things; where spiritual things are in the ascendancy over the natural things – the laws of nature. Spiritual things can refer to God and his spiritual realm or to the spiritual aspect of a person which is called his soul. Both concepts ought to be combined. Wayne Grudem in his “Systematic Theology” (Ref. 8) explains it as follows: “Paul says that the body is raised a “spiritual” body (1 Cor. 15:44). In the Pauline epistles, the word “spiritual” (Gk. Pneumatikos) never means “nonphysical” but rather “consistent with the character and activity of the Holy Spirit” (see, for example, Rom. 1:11, 7:14, 1 Cor. 2:13, 15, 3:1, 14:37, Gal. 6:1, Eph. 5:19). The RSV translation ‘It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body,’ is misleading, and a more clear paraphrase would be, ‘It is sown a natural body subject to the characteristics and desires of this age, and governed by its own sinful will, but it is raised a spiritual body, completely subject to the will of the Holy Spirit and responsive to the Holy Spirit’s guidance.’ Such a body is not at all “nonphysical” but it is a physical body raised to the degree of perfection for which God originally intended it.”

This distinction between the “natural” and “spiritual” body indicates that in the resurrection, the person’s soul in union with the Holy Spirit is in the ascendancy over what we would recognize as normal physical limitations resulting from the laws of nature. A person’s soul includes his will. This indicates that a person in his resurrection body, by an act of his will in the power and control of the Holy Spirit, will be able to overcome what would otherwise appear to be limitations that are imposed on a natural body by the laws of nature. That is why his spiritual body is immortal (2 Tim. 1:10), imperishable, powerful and glorious. The resurrection/spiritual body in theology is often also called a glorified body (John 7:39, 12:16, 23, Romans 8:30) and the process of being resurrected into a spiritual body is call glorification

(Chapter 17 of Ref. 13). The phrase “glorified body” perhaps better communicates that this body still has physicality, though it has been raised to a much higher level of spiritual control so that it better reflects God’s glory.

Wayne Grudem (Ref. 8) says: “The fact that our new bodies will be “imperishable” means that they will not wear out or grow old or ever be subject to any kind of sickness or disease. They will be completely healthy and strong forever. Moreover, since the gradual process of aging is part of the process by which our bodies now are subject to “corruption,” it is appropriate to think that our resurrection bodies will have no sign of aging, but will have the characteristics of youthful but mature manhood or womanhood forever. ... In these resurrection bodies we will clearly see humanity as God intended it to be.”

Henry C. Thiessen in his “Lectures in Systematic Theology” (Ref. 9) says: “In general it may be said that the resurrection body will not be an entirely new creation. If that were the case, it would not be the present body, but another body. But the body which is sown will be raised (1 Cor. 15:43f, 53f). Nor, on the other hand, will the resurrection body necessarily be in every detail composed of the identical particles contained in this body (1 Cor. 15:37f). All that Scripture warrants us in saying, is that the resurrection body will sustain a similar relation to the present body as the wheat in the stalk sustains to the wheat in the ground out of which it grew. An adult has the same body with which he was born, though it has undergone continual change and does not contain the same cells with which it was born. So the resurrection body will be the same body, though its make-up will be changed.” This change is what transforms the natural body into the spiritual body. As the seed that is buried grows into the plant that follows, thus showing both continuity and differences, so it is with the dead body that is buried which is raised into the resurrection body that follows, for “we will all be changed” (1 Cor. 15:51). Even Job in the Old Testament (~1900 B.C.) looked forward to this change in his body (Job 14:14-15, 19:25-27).

An issue that needs to be clarified at this point is the relation between the continuity of the soul and the future resurrection of the body. Due to the pervasive influence of naturalism in our culture, people generally believe that when the body dies, the person dies. This means that there is nothing that survives the death of the body, which means that there can be no ultimate divine judgment upon the individual for sin. This destroys three important things: the possibility of justice in the universe, the possibility of an absolute morality, and the possibility of real significance in life for in the final analysis, nothing matters. So the issue of whether mankind has a soul that survives the death of the body is very important. Fortunately, the Bible is very clear that each living person is composed of a soul as well as a body, and that the soul survives the death of the body. The central passage on the survival of the soul after the death of the body is 2 Cor. 5:1-10. In the NIV, this reads:

“¹ For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. ² Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, ³ because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. ⁴ For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up

by life. ⁵ Now the one who has fashioned us for this very purpose is God, who has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

⁶ Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. ⁷ For we live by faith, not by sight. ⁸ We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. ⁹ So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. ¹⁰ For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.”

The above passage teaches several things, but the entire passage is based on the fact that the soul continues its existence after the death of the body. In this passage, Paul is writing to the believers in the city of Corinth. It is thus for the believer that the promise is given that when the soul is “away from the body” it is then “at home with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:6-8). Other verses in the Bible that indicate that the soul survives the death of the body include Ps. 49:15, 73:24-25, Eccl. 12:5-7, Mt. 10:28, 22:31-32, Luke 16:19-31, 23:42-43, 46, Acts 7:59, Phil. 1:21-23, and Rev. 6:9-11.

In the Bible, the term “death” does not refer to cessation of existence but only to separation; in this case separation of the soul from the body. This means that at the death of the body, the soul separates from the body and continues to exist. Millard J Erickson in his “Christian Theology” says “Life and death, according to Scripture, are not to be thought of as existence and nonexistence, but as two different states of existence. Death is simply a transition to a different mode of existence; it is not, as some tend to think, extinction” (Ref. 10). Authors Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest in their three volume set “Integrative Theology” say “In Scripture physical death does not mean annihilation but the separation of the spirit from the body (James 2:26). This understanding is derived not from philosophy but from teachings of prophets and apostles and preeminently Jesus Christ – who knows the other side directly. At death a Christian’s unresponsive body is buried, decomposes in the grave, and returns to dust. There the body “sleeps” until it is resurrected. The spirit, however, is not sleeping or nonexistent but feels “unclothed” when the body is dismantled like a tent (2 Cor. 5:1).” (Ref. 11)

Upon death of a person’s body at this point in time, depending on whether the person is “saved” or not, an individual’s soul either goes to be with the Lord in what is called in theology the “intermediate state”, or goes to what is called Sheol in the Old Testament or is called Hades in the New Testament to await the great white-throne judgment (Rev. 20:11-15). The intermediate state refers to the state of the soul between the death of the body and the resurrection of the body for those who are saved. Both Sheol and Hades refer to the place/state of departed spirits now occupied by the ungodly (Mt. 22:13, 25:30, 41, 46) though Sheol-Hades is usually understood to not be the same as hell. The point is that for both the righteous and the ungodly, a person’s soul continues to exist after the death of his body, so is available to be reunited with a resurrected form of his body at the proper time appointed by God.

Another item that needs to be clarified is 1 Cor. 15:50, which says that “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God.” The concept is that an unchanged natural body of flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; it must be changed from a natural body to a spiritual

body, as taught in the following verses. Though the spiritual body is still a physical body made of flesh and bones that is able to interact with its surroundings, the spirit is in the ascendancy over the forces of nature in order to prepare it for the kingdom of God, i.e. heaven.

Application to Jesus' Resurrection

With the above understanding of the Bible's overall teaching on resurrection, we can now return to the central question of the nature of Jesus' resurrection body. Since "Jesus Christ ... will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body" (Phil. 3:21) and since Jesus' resurrection body is the "first fruits" (1 Cor. 15:20, 23) of all the saved who would be later resurrected, the nature of Jesus' resurrection body must be essentially the same as the nature of the future resurrection bodies of all the saved. This means that we can apply the right column of Table 1 to the body that Jesus had after the resurrection. Thus his resurrection body was a spiritual body so that it was immortal, imperishable, with great power and great glory. His body was not limited by the natural operation of this universe, i.e. the laws of nature, and could by his spirit, in the exercise of his will, do things that would be totally impossible for us in our natural bodies. We can not do things with our bodies that violate the laws of nature simply through our will. We can not instantaneously vanish in front of people or materialize in the middle of a crowd of people in a locked room. But Jesus did these things due to the nature of the spiritual body that He had after his resurrection.

Charles C. Ryrie (Ref. 12) summarized it this way: "Christ's resurrection body has links with his unresurrected earthly body. People recognized Him (John 20:20), the wounds inflicted by crucifixion were retained (John 20:25-29, Rev. 5:6), He had the capacity though not the need to eat (Luke 24:30-33, 41-43), He breathed on the disciples (John 20:22), and that body had flesh and bones proving that He was not merely a spirit showing itself (Luke 24:39-40). But his resurrection body was different. He could enter closed rooms without opening doors (Luke 24:36, John 20:19), He could appear and disappear at will (Luke 24:15, John 20:19), and apparently He was never limited by physical needs such as sleep or food."

Another question is how long Jesus' resurrection took. This question has application to the hypothetical formation process of the image on the Shroud of Turin, based on the belief that the Shroud of Turin is the authentic burial cloth of Jesus. Given that Jesus' resurrection is the "first fruits" (1 Cor. 15:20, 23) of the later resurrection of all the righteous, the amount of time required for Jesus' resurrection ought to be the same as the amount of time that the future resurrection of the righteous will take. This future resurrection of the righteous will occur "in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye" (1 Cor. 15:52). Therefore, the resurrection of Jesus should have also occurred "in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye". From this it should be understood that Jesus' resurrection occurred in a small fraction of a second. It did not take many seconds or minutes, hours, or days. In most scholar's understanding, Jesus' body was placed in the tomb just before the sun went down on a Friday and his burial shroud was observed to be empty by sunrise on the following Sunday, a period of about 36 hours. Jesus' resurrection would have occurred at the end of this 36-hour period, and it should have occurred in a small fraction of a second, "in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye".

Personal Application

What is the significance of Jesus' resurrection? John F. Walvoord (Ref. 13) answers the question this way: "The resurrection of Christ, of course, is key to all his present work in heaven. Because He is resurrected, people are justified in believing in his death on the cross as the basis of their salvation. His resurrection also guarantees and undergirds all his future works, including returning for his own in the Rapture, blessing all those who are the objects of his saving grace, resurrecting everyone in their proper order, reigning on the throne of David in the Millennium, and ultimately triumphing over the world in delivering the conquered world to God the Father. His resurrection also adds proof to the inspiration of the Bible and constitutes a tremendous fulfillment of prophecy recorded by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. All these factors concerning the resurrection make it clear that the resurrection and translation of Christians at the Rapture will be a tremendous event, an event worthy of our constant expectation. Knowledge of our future life helps to cast light on our present life goals, encouraging us to consider how our actions will be seen from the viewpoint of eternity."

There have always been people who disbelieved in the resurrection (Matt. 22:23, Acts 23:8, 1 Cor. 15:12). In response to the Sadducees, who disbelieved in the resurrection, Jesus said "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God" (Matt. 22:29). While this response is true and adequate to answer the Sadducees, it is not entirely adequate for dealing with the skeptic in this present-day context. Today's skeptic may phrase his objection to the resurrection of Jesus in various ways, for example:

- But this is all crazy talk.
- This is the 21st century. No one believes in that stuff any more.
- I've never seen anyone be resurrected from the dead, have you?
- Belief in the resurrection is not based on a scientific methodology, so there is no reason to believe in it.
- The resurrection is contrary to the laws of nature and is therefore impossible.
- The resurrection of Jesus, or anyone else, can not be real because there is no physical mechanism.

These objections fall into two categories: 1) an attempt to intimidate the believer through ridicule, and 2) a claim that resurrection ought to be rejected because of science. As ambassadors of Christ (2 Cor. 5:20), Jesus calls the believer to "always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have ... with gentleness and respect" by "speaking the truth in love" (1 Peter 3:15, Jude 1:3, Eph. 4:15). Christian scholars have responded to attacks against Biblical teachings, such as the above, so that valuable resources are available to assist the Christian in the areas of philosophy, world view analysis, apologetics, and science as it relates to the Bible (Ref. 14 to 28).

Conclusion

In this document (Part 1), how Jesus' body disappeared from the tomb in the resurrection has been considered from the Biblical references to his resurrection and from the theology of resurrection throughout the Bible. It was concluded that at the resurrection, Jesus' body

underwent a basic transformation, a metamorphosis, from what Paul called a natural body to a spiritual body. In his resurrected state of this spiritual body, spiritual things such as his soul and the Holy Spirit were in the ascendancy over the limitations of our physical reality, so that by an exercise of his will He could do things that might appear to contradict the laws of nature as we now understand them. Jesus' "spiritual body" after his resurrection was still a body with the characteristics of a physical body such as weight, inertia, volume, etc., and could interact with his surroundings. However, the new adjective, "spiritual", means that as the result of the basic transformation of his resurrection, his resurrected body was no longer restricted by our normal limitations related to our physical reality, thus allowing him to exit the shroud and the tomb without disturbing either. Physical considerations related to how Jesus' body disappeared from the tomb are analyzed in Part 2.

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