

The Resurrection Two-Step

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George: David, is the Christian understanding of resurrection as exclusively anthropocentric as it sometime appears? Does Christian hope include more than just hope for human beings? Is it also hope for the non-human world as well? Hope for all of God's creation?

Traditionally Christians have understood the basis of their hope to be Jesus Christ's resurrection. It is, to use Paul's metaphor, the first fruit of the promise of the resurrection of the dead. But is it only dead humans that will be raised? What about my dog Snoopy who died recently? Should I have hope for him as well? I'm not sure I want to go to heaven if it is just another faculty meeting. That sounds to me more like hell than heaven.

Much of the Christian tradition seems to imply the resurrection is only about human beings. The Apostles' Creed, for example, affirms "the resurrection of the body," and The Nicene Creed "the resurrection of the dead." When the Westminster Confession of Faith (a document dear to both Reformed and Baptists) discusses resurrection in its penultimate chapter, it describes human bodies that die and "see corruption" but on "the last day" are reunited with their souls which neither die nor sleep, but "immediately return to God who gave them." Most theologians and biblical scholars recognize that this body/soul dualism and the affirmation of the soul's immortality has more to do with Plato than with the Bible, but even if we revise Westminster's understanding of human beings, resurrection still seems to refer exclusively to human beings. Everything else is dust to dust and ashes to ashes. Perhaps an exception is the last line of the Nicene Creed which affirms not only "the resurrection of the dead," but also "the life of the world to come." But is that life more than just human life? Is "the world to come," the new heaven and the new earth in Isaiah 66:22 ff. and Revelation 21:1?

It is interesting that when Paul discusses resurrection and Christian hope in I Corinthians 15, he makes extensive use of non-human metaphors. In verses 35-41 he uses images of "a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain," the bodies of animals, birds, and fish, and the sun, the moon, and the stars. How literally should we read Paul? Was he using these examples only to illustrate the glorified, incorruptible human body that will be raised, or was he suggesting that it is not just human beings that will be raised and transformed, but the whole of God's creation?

David: As I understand it, the promise of New Creation guarantees against both faculty and session meetings, though choir practice continues indefinitely. It is the consummation for which every minister of music I know devoutly longs. No sermons, just song.

To say at the outset what I'll probably say again, my reading of Paul is that he is trying to imagine what is barely imaginable in order to persuade the Corinthians of resurrection hope for themselves. In 1 Corinthians 15, I'm inclined to think that he's using all these analogies as analogies without making any claim about God's promise for the non-human creation, though by the time he is through, he has largely recapitu-

lated all the steps of creation in Genesis 1 and used that story as a kind of parable for our final hope. (And some commentators think that his words about heavenly bodies respond to what some of the Corinthians might have believed, that our immortal selves are made of star-like stuff, and in death we quite literally return to the heavens.)

What I think Paul is trying to do is to apply his own experience of the risen Christ to the Corinthians' own hope and to assure them that as Jesus was Jesus, but not simply the Galilean Jesus with a brighter robe, so the resurrected Corinthians will be themselves—Stephanas and Chloe and so on, but not just the same Stephanas and Chloe. Their resurrected bodies will be driven by God's spirit and not by their own heart and lungs.

In Romans 8, however, there is no question that all creation is caught up in hope—not just for the redemption of the children of God, but for the redemption of the cosmos. What that means for Snoopy or any of our beloved pets is far beyond my ken.

Also beyond my ken is what the hope for the redemption of the cosmos means when we look at the stars with much greater accuracy than the writer of Psalm 8 or St. Paul could imagine. We are very small people on a very small planet in a modest sized galaxy, way off in a corner of the known universe. If God is God, God's intentions must have something to do with everything God has created—not just us. In our hope for New Heaven and New Earth, New Heaven will still be very big and new earth pretty small.

George: That's very helpful. Ever since I first studied these texts as a student at Yale Divinity School, I have been confused about what Christian hope entails and what it does not.

David: What was it that confused you?

George: I thought we were supposed to hope for a New Heaven and a New Earth.

David: (silence).

George: Well, seriously, it does not sound to me as though you think Paul was much of a systematic theologian. (I suppose there are worse things one could say about another person, but none come readily to mind.) I gather you think Paul's use of nature metaphors in I Corinthians 15:35-41 does not mean that Paul thought the promise of "the resurrection of the dead" referred to the whole of creation, but only to human beings. In Romans 8:18-25, however, it sounds like Paul has in mind not just the redemption of human beings, but the whole of creation, including puppy dogs. When Paul writes that creation "waits with eager longing" (8:19) and is "groaning in labor pains" (8:22), he seems to reverse what he did in I Corinthians 15:35-41. In the latter text he uses examples from nature to describe Christian hope in the resurrection of the dead, but in Romans 8 he uses examples from human experience to describe God's redemption of the whole of creation. If Paul were a decent systematic theologian, he would remind the Corinthians that it is not just for this life only that we have hoped (I Cor. 15:19); it is also not just for our own species. After all, there is ample evidence in his letter that the Corinthians had considerable difficulty living together in community. Perhaps it would have helped them to realize that community extends beyond human relationships to include the whole of God's creation.

David: Perhaps Paul thought it was more important to be a faithful Christian than a systematic theologian.

George: Perhaps, although that is difficult for me to understand. But regardless of what Paul thought, you make the interesting observation that by the time he has

finished his argument in I Corinthians 15, he has “largely recapitulated all the steps of creation in Genesis 1 and used that story as a kind of parable for our final hope.” Could you say a little more about that?

David: The clearest clue that Paul has Genesis in mind comes in I Corinthians 15:45 where Paul quotes Genesis 2:7 (in the Septuagint): “The first man, Adam, became a living soul.” Then Paul draws the contrast between Adam who merely lives and Christ who not only lives, he gives life. And we live our lives between the first Adam (because we are dust) and the second Adam (because we bear Christ’s image).

What I wonder is whether in the preceding paragraph Paul also has the Genesis story in mind—now not Genesis 2, but Genesis 1. We have a list of the different kinds of bodies—seeds that become plants, but also human beings, animals, birds, fish (reversing the order of creation in Gen. 1) and then completing the reversal and recapitulation, the bodies of the sun, moon and stars. I think this may actually help your thesis—that when Paul talks about the final hope, he looks not just to humans, but to the whole host of created things to draw his analogies.

There’s probably an article in there somewhere, but I realize that this one isn’t it. **George:** I wonder why Paul’s imagination was drawn to the creation story in order to describe Christ’s resurrection and the nature of Christian hope.

Paul seems to insist that there is continuity in Christ’s resurrection between the Jesus who dies on the cross and the Jesus God raises from the dead. In an important sense it is the same person. But he also seems to think there is discontinuity as well. It is the same “body” or soma that is raised—the risen Christ is the crucified Christ—but it also is not the same. “It was sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body” (v. 44) and the perishable body that died is raised imperishable. (I cannot remember whether it was Paul or Handel who wrote that.) Without denying the continuity between the one who was crucified and the one who is raised, it sounds like Paul thinks there is something unprecedented and completely new that happens in Jesus’ resurrection, and in order to describe this *novum*, this “new creation,” perhaps he is drawn to the creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2. To what extent do you think there is a parallel between God’s act of creation in Genesis and God’s act of “new creation” in Romans 8 and I Corinthians 15? And if there is a parallel, would it not be strange for Paul to limit “new creation” to what God did after lunch on the sixth day (Genesis 1:24-31)? After all, in the NRSV translation of II Corinthians 5:17, Paul writes that “if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.” Interestingly, this translation of the text does not say that only those in Christ are a new creation, although presumably that is intended as well, but that “there is a new creation.” And apparently this new creation is not simply one in which human beings are reconciled to one another, but one in which God is “reconciling the world to himself.”

I know you New Testament people have serious reservations about whether Paul wrote Colossians, but if he didn’t, he should have, and, interestingly, in the Christ hymn in 1:15 ff. the Christ who is described in I Corinthians 15 as the “first fruits” (vv. 20, 23) is described as “the first born of all creation” (v. 15), suggesting that God’s act of reconciliation is by no means limited to human beings. It is through the crucified and resurrected Christ that God “was pleased to reconcile to himself *all things*, whether on earth or in heaven (v. 20), and “all things” seems to cast a very large net, including not only things that occupy space, but time as well. “He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together....He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead,

so that he might come to have first place in everything” (vv. 17-18). If we read these texts in relation to one another (as systematic theologians are wont to do), Christ’s resurrection is the first fruits not only of the resurrection of the dead, but the first fruits of God’s new heaven and new earth, which seems to include the whole of creation.

David: Whether or not Paul wrote Colossians, I think you’re right that the claim that Christ is the “firstborn of all creation” picks up on the motif that really is there in Paul, that God in Christ is making a new creation, not only new human creatures. So I want to affirm with you that God’s business is bigger than what God has done, is doing, and intends to do with humans.

Having said that, I confess to being entirely agnostic about the details of what that means for particular non-human creatures. To be confessional, I have presided over many burials for humans and a few burials for pets. In the former case I always talk about “the sure and certain hope of resurrection from the dead through Jesus Christ our Lord,” and in the latter case, I never do. When I think of the communion of saints, I never think of the communion of saints and their cats and dogs.

Does this mean that at some deep level I am a specie-ist, a person who wants to privilege the human species as racists want to privilege a particular race? Maybe. Looking at it another way, does the hope for a new creation mean the hope for the resurrection of every created thing? My friends in biology tell me that by far the largest species of created things are the beetles. Or do we have a kind of rough estimate of where some kind of genuine intelligence begins—with dogs, cats, and I am told, especially pigs. Are these the animals with “souls,” who therefore can be included in God’s eschatological promise?

I end up in far deeper waters than I can navigate. I think we see through a glass very dimly, that when we see face to face, what we will see is the face of God. I pray that we will also see the faces of the people we have loved and lost awhile. I have no idea whether Christian hope extends to the pets of the faithful, too.

I do think that for Paul, as for Christians, there are two great interlinked miracles—creation and resurrection—and that we cannot really understand the one without the other. When Paul wants to name God, he brings the two miracles together. (The God in whom Abraham believed) “gives life to the dead and brings into existence the things that do not exist.” (Rom. 4:17). Because of the promise of this God, says Paul, Abraham “hopes against hope.” So do we, I think, without always being able to draw a very clear picture of what we hope for.

George: I especially like Romans 4:17 because it seems to provide some basis for the Christian claim that God creates *ex nihilo*. As you know, many of our Old Testament colleagues howl and tear their hair when theologians try to use Genesis 1 as a basis for the Christian claim that God creates out of nothing—*ex nihilo*. Paul’s claim that God “gives life to the dead and brings into existence the things that do not exist” will do just fine as a warrant for the claim that God creates *ex nihilo*. That might suggest that the basis for the Christian claim that God creates *ex nihilo* is first and foremost Christ’s resurrection and that we should understand Genesis 1:1-2 in light of Easter. We usually think of *nihilo* as pertaining to God’s “first” act of creation, but this parallel might suggest it pertains primarily to God’s “last” act of creation—God’s new creation in Jesus’ resurrection and the promise of the same at “the last day” and “the resurrection of the dead”—and it is that giving life to the dead that is basis for our understanding of God’s original bringing into existence “the things that do not exist.” Our Old

Testament colleagues will love that one.

That raises two additional questions. First, how should we understand death? In the preceding paragraph I suggested that death might be understood as a *nihilo* or a non-existence. But Paul's favorite metaphor for death seems to be "sleep." It is difficult to know precisely what he means by death as sleep, just as it is difficult to know precisely what he means by seeing "face to face" (I Cor. 13:12). However, Paul does seem to distinguish between death as "sleep" and death as being no more or "perishing," and that may suggest that somehow death is not a *nihilo*. In I Cor. 15:16-19 Paul argues that if there is no resurrection of the dead at the last day, then Christ has not been raised and "those who have died [or fallen asleep] in Christ have perished." But is it only human beings who having lived and died then sleep? Or is there some sense in which all the things that once were but now no longer are also "sleep"? Romans 8:19-23 does seem to affirm that not only dead people, but all of creation, perhaps including "all things" that no longer exist, "waits with eager longing" to be "set free from its bondage to decay." I suppose one might argue that one significant difference for Paul has to do with what is baptized and what is not. Romans 6:1-11 affirms hope for those who in baptism have been "united with him [Christ] in a death like his" and "will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." Paul does not seem to allow for the baptism of "all things." Is there a difference between human death and the "death" of non-human creatures, species, stars, suns, moons, galaxies, and dogs?

That does, however, raise the question of Christian hope. In its most important sense Christian hope is hope in God, but for Paul isn't it more than that? It is not just hope for "this life only" (I Cor. 15:19), but hope for "the end," when Christ will come and hand over "the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power, including death" and the dead will be raised (I Cor. 15:24-27). Paul's hope seems to spread out over a large canvas, and I am left wondering how large it is. Does it include hope for the redemption of all of creation? And if so, what does that mean for daily Christian existence? Is Christian hope truly Christian if it is hope only for us and our kind? Is it only for the human world that Christians pray that God's redeeming will "be done on earth as it is in heaven"?

David: In deference to my advanced age, I get the last word for this version of our ongoing discussion. So let me respond to each of your queries briefly. I very much like the suggestion that Christians understand creation in the light of resurrection and not always the other way around. On my most Christocentric days I think we should understand everything in the light of Christ crucified and risen, and there is certainly precedent in John 1 and in Colossians for seeing creation as Christ-shaped—so why not resurrection shaped as well?

On the issue of whether resurrection from the dead is really like creation *ex nihilo* because Paul says that those who are dead are asleep, I remain uncertain. The use of "sleeping" as a euphemism for death by no means originates with Paul, and it may not carry any particular descriptive weight. What Paul does say explicitly is that death is an enemy to be overcome (I Corinthians 15:26, 54-57). He may also sometimes imply that death is simply a sign of finitude (as sleep is a sign of physical limits), but he does not ride that one nearly as hard as he rides the claim that Christ's resurrection and ours are a victory over the real enemy—death. As with so much of 1 Corinthians 15, I think this claim is based on his reading of Genesis 2 where, counter to many Old Testament

interpreters, he believes that the certainty of death is indeed a consequence of disobedience, sin.

I am still agnostic on the question of the way in which resurrection might include the non-human creation, but I note with some appreciation your suggestion (also made by Paul Fiddes in his book *The Promised End*)¹ that the resurrection promise is for the Body of Christ—that is the baptized—both communally and individually. I have prayerfully buried some pets, but (fortunately) never baptized one.

As it happens my other project for this week is to write a guide for preachers on I John 3:2 where the writer says, “Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is that we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.” I like that because it is modest about what we know and (to coin a phrase) audacious about what we hope.

Happy Easter.

Note

1 Paul Fiddes, *The Promised End* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).