

“The Spiritual Body.”

A STRIKING SERMON

BY THE

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The Spiritual Body.

‘If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.’—
1 Corinthians xv. 44.

The idea of the redemption of the whole man was the great truth expressed by the doctrine of the resurrection from the dead; and the illustration used by St. Paul in this chapter is intended to help us to a right conception of what the doctrine really means, for to us, it would seem that some kind of body is essential to the complete identity of a human being; and yet the thought of a body precisely similar to this seems incompatible with the idea of a spiritual life. What then does the resurrection of the body mean? How are the dead raised, and with what body do they come?

It is wonderful how, at the stroke of a master hand, difficulties fall away that before seemed insuperable. ‘That which thou sowest is not quickened except it die, and that which thou sowest, thou sowest not the body that shall be, but bare grain—it may chance of wheat or of some other grain—but God giveth it a body, even as it has pleased Him, and to each seed a body of its own.’

If we try to make the illustration of the corn sown in the ground apply in every part to the human body laid in the grave, we shall get into difficulties as great as those from which we have escaped, and, indeed, this would be an unfair way in which to treat any illustration. But see how helpful it is in the essential points. It relieves us at once of that old perplexity which came from supposing that this same body, after it has crumbled to dust, and been blown to the winds of heaven, can rise again. St. Paul disposes of such a notion very quickly, and with somewhat scant courtesy. To the man who puts the supposed question: “How are the dead raised, and with what manner of body do they come?” he answers as though he thought that the man had some idea that precisely the same body rose—‘Thou foolish one, that which thou sowest, thou sowest not the body that shall be, but bare grain—it may chance of wheat or of some other kind, but God giveth it a body, even as it has pleased Him, and to each seed a body of its own.’ And then he exhausts all similitudes in showing the possible variety and divergence of bodies, and how manifold are the differences, even in matter, between body and body—and yet that each is a body—and from this he draws the deduction that, in a still higher form, the resurrection body will fulfil the aspirations, and repair the deficiencies, of the body of our mortality. The corn-seed, the grain of wheat, teach that the same thing which we put in the ground does not come up. We sow the bare grain—there comes

up the blade, the ear, the full corn in the ear. We put in the acorn, there springs from it the oak.

But the Apostle's illustration teaches us more than this. It shows that though the same body does not rise again, yet a similar body does. The corn harvest ripening in the sun, waving in the wind, is not the same as those few handfuls of grain which the sower scattered in the field, but it has an essential correspondence thereto. The oak, swaying and wrestling in the grip of the storm, is not the same as the little acorn that died in the dark earth, but it is closely allied to it—it is of kindred nature. The acorn could not produce an elm. The grain of wheat could not produce an ear of barley. There is an essential likeness between that which is sown, and that which is the result of the sowing.

So, I apprehend, will it be in the resurrection of the dead. Though it is sown a natural body, and raised a spiritual body, the spiritual body will be like the natural, will answer to it, and possess some of its essential features. I incline myself to the opinion that this body of ours, with its outward form and features, is, in reality, but the index to the soul within, the shape and fashion which it takes to express outwardly its own inner and invisible features. Have you never noticed how much the face, the walk, the whole bearing of a man correspond to his character, his real self; and even where, at first, this sometimes seems not to apply, it is often found, on closer knowledge, to hold true? The generous man has large-heartedness written on his face. The precise man has an exceedingly precise and proper bearing. The treacherous man has a shuffling walk—he has falseness in his eye, or written about the corners of his mouth; the true and upright unconsciously tell you they are so by the very tones of their voice and grasp of the hand. This is the secret of those strange attractions and repulsions which we all sometimes feel. We come into the presence of one man and we are instinctively repelled. We try to put the feeling away as prejudice, but we cannot. We come into the presence of another, and we are drawn to him, we know not why. What is the meaning of this? I believe that it is the intuitive soul of the one perceiving the secret soul of the other.

Now if the spiritual body will be like the one which we are at present inhabiting, do we not see how, quite incidentally, this answers an old question which used frequently to be put, viz., Shall we recognise our friends in the future life? We have all known people who have been troubled on this point. The idea that their loved ones, who were gone, had become mere shades or ghosts, formless and ethereal somethings that they would never recognise, is very comfortless to those who are left behind. But the thought of St. Paul suggests a warmer and more cheering hope. If there is a natural body and a spiritual body, and the one will be like, though not the same as, the other, just as the field of corn, though not the same, has close resemblance to the seed, then this precious truth is assured us—that the doctrine of the future life involves not only the immortality of the soul, but the resurrection, the redemption of the whole man.

A disembodied soul is but half a man. Man is soul and body. If, therefore, there is to be a future life for man, it must be a life complete in both parts, for a soul by itself is a ghost, and not a man. We want to find and know and love in the after-life those who have been so dear to us upon earth, and this wish is right. We shall see them again, and (from the teaching of St. Paul here) it seems to me impossible to doubt that we shall recognise them, because he so plainly suggests the beautiful truth that the redeemed man will be like the man we knew on earth—the spiritual will be the outgrowth of the natural, as the harvest is the outgrowth of the scattered seed—so that when we meet our friends in the great hereafter, we shall know them. It will be the real man, and not the shadow—the whole of the spiritual being will be there with a spiritual organism higher, purer, and yet resembling that which was worn on earth, and we shall recognise that, and rejoice in the identity.

I cherish this conviction with exceeding thankfulness. I believe that the love which longs to retain all that in the loved one which is good and beautiful, and is essential to the real person, is a divinely implanted thing. It is not given for a little while, to be rent from us at death. Love is not a thing of time, or space, or outward circumstance—it is immortal as the heart which pulsates with its fire; and if you tear it from us you take away part of our being. Our Lord teaches us not to love temporarily, but eternally. He told the weeping sisters that their brother should be given back to them in the resurrection. A blessed re-union awaits every holy attachment. All pure and holy loves will have their coronation within the veil. For them the best is yet to be. Hence there is given us, not the hope of meeting some ethereal shadow of the dear one, but the real man, robed in the spiritual body—the incorruptible form, purified from its old grosser and sin-scarred tabernacle of the flesh—changed from this body of the human into the body of the resurrection.

But the Apostle's illustration goes a great deal further than this, and teaches a still finer truth. It suggests not only that the natural and the spiritual will correspond, but that the one will be far nobler and more beautiful than the other.

The harvest is a great advance upon the seed-time. The mustard-tree, among whose branches the birds can lodge, is a great development from the little grain that was deposited in the soil. So also is it with the resurrection of the dead. Oh! how beautiful are the words of our burial service—'It is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness—it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body—it is raised a spiritual body.'

Ah! brethren, we know not what is meant by the spiritual body, but the expression is suggestive of the highest form of evolution. We think of these frail forms of ours losing all that which is earthly, all that which grows tired, all that which is destined to decay and dissolution, and out of it the redeemed man rising into a larger and more glorious life.

There is a beautiful though imperfect illustration of this in the natural world. Few things in the realm of natural science are more striking than the sudden change of the chrysalis into the butterfly. The dull lifeless-looking thing all at once opening out into the bright, many-colored winged inhabitant of the air, so beautiful and yet so fragile and unearthly in its loveliness that the slightest touch of our rough hands will mar its delicate pencilling; and yet it is said that there is not one spot or shade of colour upon the wings of the butterfly which was not there in germ as it lay dark and ugly-looking upon the ground, in its chrysalis stage. It was not painted and fashioned suddenly by some miraculous hand; but growing silently and out of sight, it developed into this fair and beautiful form, with its own traits and colours, just as they were prepared in the old half-lifeless state.

Perhaps the change that will come over us in the resurrection may be something analogous to this. A higher, freer, brighter existence will open out—but the features, the form, the colouring, will answer to that of the lower and feebler conditions.

My brethren, do you not think that the body which our Lord wore helps us to a realisation of this truth. Owing to the miraculous conception, no human taint was ever transmitted to Him, and so His Body was changed into the spiritual without passing, as ours must, through the 'purification of corruption.' Even in the days of His humiliation, His body was more spiritual than ours. He walked the storm-tossed waves, and His body was the appropriate vehicle of miraculous powers. A strange light flashed through it on the Mount of Transfiguration. To my mind it is unthinkable that such a body could be holden of death, or could see corruption. But after He had fought out for us the battle with sin, and gained the victory, the body which had always been spiritual became more so. It passed through closed doors. It was redeemed from the ordinary limitations of time and space and at last ascended above the clouds, and I believe that this body, is the type of the one which we shall inhabit—'For as we have borne the image of the earthly, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly.' And if any one is disposed to ask how a spiritual body can be evolved out of a corpse, I would ask him how can the butterfly be evolved out of the caterpillar? How can the crimson and white of the apple blossom come forth from the dark branch? How can the grape cluster come out of the vine? Are not the forms of next year's growth and beauty concealed to-day in those unpromising and in some cases repellent forms? Why then should it seem incredible to us that out of our present material body, a more spiritual one should issue?

Would that we could believe more in the spiritual world and the reality of spiritual forces. I think it is a great mistake to teach children that they have spirits. We should rather teach them that they have bodies and are spirits. The material body is but a mere instrument suited to the present world—but is no more a constituent of a man's nature than (to borrow an illustration) a diver's cumbrous dress is inseparable from the wearer. The diver's

apparatus is simply assumed in order that he may be able to work under the water—and man is clothed in a material vesture, in order that he may live in a material world. But even when under water the diver draws every breath from the upper air. If that is shut off he will be suffocated. And we are spirits existing only through perpetual supplies from the great Spirit, in Whom “we live and move, and have our being.” There are the two spheres—the material and the spiritual, and the one is as real—nay, more so—than the other. What we cannot see with the outward eye is greater than that which can be touched and handled. Science concerns herself with matter—but God is not matter. It is not to be wondered at, therefore, that He cannot be discovered by a telescope or a pair of forceps. How can you expect to find the great Spirit along such lines as these? A surgeon, who conducts a post-mortem examination, would not expect to find the heroism of a patriot, the genius of a poet, the piety of a saint, or the affection of a lover. You may dissect the worn-out body of a poet, but you cannot take out the poetry, because the poet is not there. You cannot find the music by opening the organ, nor discover the air by taking the bellows to pieces. God can no more be seen with the outward eye, than you can see the light in its swift passage through the air, or the force of attraction which binds the worlds together. And yet the great Teacher said: ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.’

Do you doubt it? To me it is a statement whose profound truth is echoed by our innermost consciousness.

If a worker in mosaic can, simply by long practice, detect shades which to us are imperceptible—if an Esquimaux can distinguish the white fox in the white snow—if an Australian tracker can, by his quickened perceptive faculty, discover the trail of a criminal amid the sand of the Australian bush, and pursue him to his lair—shall not a man who, day by day, puts his knife through the lower desires, and fights against the flesh and the devil, have his reward in a clarified vision, which will enable him to see God?

Would that we had more spiritual sight. We pity the blind man on the streets, dependent on the kind offices of his friend to take him over the crossing; but he may not be the man to compassionate. The man to pity may be the man who is pitying him—for the one has lost only the eyes of the body, whilst the other may be blind in his heart.

I believe, then, that there is a spiritual body which is even now being fashioned, and that the material frame will never be renewed after what we call death,—indeed there is no reason why it should be. In a more spiritual state we shall not want it. As well might the butterfly creep back into the grovelling caterpillar. “There is a natural body and there is a spiritual body.” But again I ask you to remember that although the spiritual body will be a development, it will not be altogether dissimilar. The risen Jesus was recognised by his disciples as the same man. The yonder life will be an evolution of the present, but not a reversion. I like to think that when we pass the narrow frontier and enter the unknown

land, which now seems to us so intangible and so incomprehensible, it will not be so strange as we imagine. Reversals, indeed, of moral judgment as accepted by men down here, we shall find. In many cases "the first shall be last, and the last first." And yet even these judgments will be in harmony with what we have been told, although we may not have believed. It will be the same moral world, and we shall be the same. And I like to think that we shall not be startled. I have often been struck when standing by the coffin to see the strange look of peace and quiet assurance which has smoothed out the wrinkles and softened the brow, and imparted sweetness to the still mouth. Does not this suggest that death is not so dreadful as we think it is?

Did you ever see a picture by Noel Paton entitled "Mors Janna Vitae"—"Death the Gate of Life?" Let us recall it. He pictures a warrior coming up out of a grave. At the edge lie the helmet and sword indicating that the strife is over. Close to the grave is a cross with a chrysalis at the base, and a beautiful butterfly at the top, suggesting the thought that through contact with the Crucified One, we leave behind the old form, and pass into newness of life. And how is death depicted? It is represented as being on one side a skeleton, and on the other an angel of light. One hand is stretched out to the man coming up from the grave, and the other lifts a curtain through which can be seen a beautiful city with angel forms, whilst the moon is waning, and no star is visible. What is the artist's idea? It is this. That whilst to our eyes Death is repulsive as a skeleton, on the other side there is light and life, and in dying we pass through the shadows as through a gateway and enter into life. It is a fine conception. Sir Noel Paton had grasped the great truth that if Christ had not gone down into the darkness, and left a light behind, death would have been a skeleton, cold and grim and ghastly, laying a bony hand upon the throbbing pulse of all our hopes, whilst the moonlight of earthly glory goes down, and not a star can anywhere be seen. But since Christ has risen, death is an angel standing half in the shadow, and half in the light, stretching out one hand to the warrior fresh from the battlefields of earth, and with the other drawing back the veil which hides us from the unseen glory, and then bearing the soul away into the presence of Him, whose royalty she owns, whose living messenger she will be, until death is swallowed up in victory.

Believe me, your dear ones are not dead. The Greeks had the true conception. They never spoke of the Resurrection, as if the old body could ever be resuscitated. They spoke of the "Anastasis"—the development. The departed are not dead, but are alive unto God for evermore.

"For inside that city 'tis sung and 'tis said
That they are the living, and we are the dead."