

The World To Come: Ethereal Or Real?

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Samuele Bacchiocchi, Ph. D.
Professor of Theology, Andrews University

Dear Members of the Endtime Issues Forum:

Those of you who read the **Endtime Issues No. 7** on "**Hell: Eternal Torment or Annihilation?**" will welcome the present topic "**The World to Come: Ethereal or Real?**" There is no question that it is more pleasant to study what the Bible teaches about the delight of "Heaven" than about the destruction of "Hell."

Surprisingly, however, most Christians are losing interest in the world to come because they find it too chaste, too disinfected, too unreal, and too boring. The Evil One has done a masterful job in misleading people to believe that the world to come is a kind of spiritual monastic retreat where the joys of the present life are nowhere to be found. This prevailing misconception has been inspired by Platonic dualism rather than Biblical realism. To rekindle the Christian interest in the world to come, it is imperative to recover the Biblical wholistic and realistic vision of the new earth. This is what I have attempted to do in several chapters of three of books I have authored. This essay is a brief summary of what I have published elsewhere.

For the sake of those who use JUNO as their internet provider, I will divide this Bible study in two parts. Every time I email an essay, I receive many complaints from JUNO subscribers saying that the Bible study was rejected because it was too long. This problem has consumed much of my precious time. JUNO is free but is very limited in its service. I would urge JUNO subscribers sign up for a JUNO upgrade, which I understand costs less than \$5.00 per month. I trust that by keeping the essays to less than 30K, there will be no more problems.

This two parts essay explores what the Bible teaches on two fundamental questions. In this installment we examine **What will people be like in the world to come?** Will the redeemed be resurrected with a physical body like the present one, or will they receive a radically different spiritual body? Will they be the same individuals as those who existed previously on earth or will they be completely different?

The next installment, **Endtime issues No. 9**, considers **What will life be like in the world to come?** Will the new world be a material place like the present one or a "spiritual" realm radically different from our present world? Will the redeemed engage in the kind of activities we know today, or will they spend eternity in everlasting contemplation and mediation? Will they live as married couples or as single persons?

These are vital questions that deserve careful Biblical investigation because what Christians believe about their life in the world to come largely determines how they live their life in the present world.

Update on the Sabbath/Sunday Media Coverage. Several members of our forum have informed me that the **WASHINGTON POST's** article "**When is the Lord's Day? Adventist Says Pope Unfairly Promotes Sunday Sabbath**" has already been reprinted in their local papers. It has been a pleasant surprise for me to see the article reprinted even in our local **SOUTH BEND TRIBUNE** on Friday, January 29, especially since South Bend has a strong Catholic presence with Notre Dame University. Several religion correspondents have requested a review copy of my latest book **THE SABBATH UNDER CROSSFIRE**, because they want to study the issue more fully before doing any writing. I will keep you posted about future developments.

During the past two weeks I have exchanged several messages with Bill Broadway of the **WASHINGTON POST**. I have encourage him to address the explosive issue of the prevailing deception of conscious life after death. I have shared with him some of the highlights of my book **IMMORTALITY OR RESURRECTION?** where I unmask this deception. Mr. Broadway is interested to feature this issue in a future article, but it may be a while since at present he is preparing articles on other religious issues. I will be sure to let you know when the article appears.

I would to express my sincere gratitude to all of all who have invited your friends to join our **ENDTIME ISSUES FORUM**. We have been adding to the forum an average of 200 new names each week. Thank you for making it possible for me to share this ministry of Biblical research with a wider readership.

THE WORLD TO COME: ETHEREAL OR REAL?

Have you ever planned a vacation to an unknown exotic island? If you have, chances are that you tried to find out as much as possible about the weather, the accommodation, the food, the people, and the unique characteristics of place. Gathering information about a dreamed vacation on a "paradise island" heightens the longing and the anticipation of journey.

Christians should be equally eager to learn as much as possible about the new world that awaits them at the end of their earthly pilgrimage. A clearer vision of the world to come can nourish the hope and strengthen the faith of those called to live among the uncertainties and troubles of the present life.

Historically, most Christians have envisioned the world to come as a place that is beautiful but ethereal, a place where the solid joys of this present life must be exchanged for a spiritual existence of continuous adoration and contemplation. Such vision of the world to come is reflected in the lines of popular hymns such as the one that says: "In mansions of glory and endless delight, I'll ever adore Thee in heaven so bright."

The thought of spending eternity in a spiritual center somewhere off in space, wearing white robes, plucking harps, singing, meditating, and contemplating, was attractive to medieval Christians who envisioned Paradise as a kind of monastic retreat. Such vision of Paradise, however, can hardly appeal to twentieth-century Christians in love with the sights and sounds of the great metropolis. This may explain why most Christians today do not seem to be eagerly waiting for the coming of the Lord to establish His eternal kingdom. They are not so sure if they want to live like monks for all eternity in the beatitude of an ethereal Paradise which is too chaste, too disinfected, and too unreal.

The ethereal vision of Paradise has been inspired more by Greek philosophical dualism than by Biblical wholistic realism. For the Greeks, the physical body and the material components of this world were evil and, consequently, not worthy of survival. Their aim was to reach a spiritual realm where their souls liberated from the prison-house of a physical body and of a material world, would enjoy eternal bliss.

Biblical Realism. The Bible rejects the ethereal vision of the world to come because it affirms the goodness of God's physical creation. "It was good," is the ringing divine proclamation of each stage of the creation of human and subhuman life (Gen 1:10, 18, 21, 25, 31). The purpose of redemption is not the liberation of spiritual souls from the bondage of a the physical body and of a material world but the restoration of the whole human and sub-human creation to their original perfection. The "new heaven and new earth" (Is 65:17; Rev 21:1) are not a remote and inconsequential world somewhere off in space; rather they are the present heaven and earth renewed to their original perfection.

What Will People be Like in the World to Come?

Before taking a closer look at the Biblical glimpses about life in world to come in **Endtime Issues No. 9**, let us consider what will people be like in the new world. Will

the resurrected/translated saints receive a physical body like the present one or a spiritual body radically different from the present one?

We are rather fortunate to have Paul's discussion of this very question which had been raised by the Corinthians: "But some one will ask, 'How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?' You foolish man! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body which is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body" (1 Cor 15:35-38).

What Paul is saying here is that as God gives a body to each kind of seed that is sown, so He will give a body to each person who is buried. The fact that deceased bodies are buried like the seed in the ground may have suggested to Paul the analogy of the seed. Paul develops further the analogy of the seed by giving us the clearest description we find in the Bible of the continuity/discontinuity between the present and future body: "So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body" (1 Cor 15:42-44).

In this passage Paul explains the difference between our present body and the future resurrection body by means of four contrasts. These contrasts are equally applicable to the bodies of the living saints who will be transformed at Christ's return without seeing death. First, our present bodies are perishable (phthora)-subject to sickness and death-but our resurrection bodies will be imperishable (aphtharsia)-no longer liable to sickness and death. Second, our present bodies experience the dishonor of being lowered into a grave, but our resurrection bodies will experience the glory of an inner and outward transformation.

Third, our present bodies are weak, as they easily become tired and exhausted, but our resurrection bodies will be full of power, with boundless energy to accomplish all our goals. Fourth, our present bodies are physical (soma psychikon), but our resurrection bodies will be spiritual (soma pneumatikon). This last contrast has led many to believe that our resurrection/translation bodies will be "spiritual" in the sense that they consist of a non-physical, non-material substance, whatever that may be.

A "Spiritual" Resurrected Body. Did Paul believe and does the Bible teach that at the resurrection/translation believers will receive non-material and non-physical bodies, totally devoid of physical substance? This is indeed the view of many Christians today. They define "spiritual body-soma pneumatikon" as meaning a non-physical body suitable for the new "heavenly environment."¹

This popular belief rests on the assumption that God will condemn this earth to eternal desolation and create, instead, a new "heavenly" world suitable for the habitation of spiritual saints. This assumption raises serious questions about the wisdom of God in first creating this planet to sustain human and subhuman life, only to discover later that it is not the ideal place for the eternal habitation of the redeemed. To remedy the problem, God would then be compelled to create a non-material "heavenly planet" and to equip the resurrected saints with "spiritual bodies" suitable for such a heavenly environment.

This reasoning is ludicrous, to say the least, for anyone who believes in the omniscience and immutability of God. Changing models and structures is normal for finite human beings who learn by mistakes, but it would be abnormal and inconsistent for a infinite God who knows the end from the beginning. If God discovered that matter had become intrinsically evil so that it had to be banished, then, in a sense, the Devil and the Greek philosophers would have been proven right. But matter is not evil because it is part of God's good creation. The Bible affirms that this material world was "very good" (Gen 1:31) at creation, and there is no reason to believe that it will be "very bad" at the final restoration.

The most compelling proof of the goodness of the present creation is the teaching of the resurrection of the body,-a teaching that was absurd and offensive to Greek thinkers who believed that the physical body as well as the material world are evil, and thus to be discarded at death. For them only the disembodied soul survives the death of the body.

Apparently some Corinthian Christians were influenced by this prevailing Greek dualistic view of human nature and destiny. This is indicated by Paul's question: "How can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?" (1 Cor 15:12). Paul refutes this error by affirming the resurrection of the body. This teaching provides the most convincing proof of the continuity between the present life and the life to come.

Spirit Led. Some challenge the notion of continuity because Paul contrasts the present "physical-psychikos" body with the future "spiritual-pneumatikon" resurrection/translation body. To them this contrast indicates that the resurrection body will no longer be physical consisting of "flesh and blood." This interpretation ignores that for Paul "spiritual" does not mean "non-physical." This is evidenced by His usage of the same two words (physical-psychikos/spiritual-pneumatikos) in the same epistle with reference to the present life: "The unspiritual [physical-psychikos] man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual [pneumatikos] man judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one" (1 Cor 2:14-15).

It is obvious that the spiritual man in this passage is not a non-physical person. Rather, it is someone who is guided by the Holy Spirit, in contradistinction from someone who is guided by natural impulses. Similarly, the resurrection body is called in 1 Corinthians 15:44 "spiritual" because it is ruled not by carnal impulses but by the Holy Spirit. This is not an anthropological dualism between a "physical-psyche" and a "spiritual-pneuma" nature, but a moral distinction between a life led by the Holy Spirit and one controlled by sinful desires.

This insight helps us also to understand Paul's statement a few verses later: "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable" (1 Cor 15:50). It is evident here Paul is not saying that the resurrection body will be nonphysical, because, writing to the Romans, he says: "But you are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, if the Spirit of God really dwells in you" (Rom 8:9).

By the phrase "not in the flesh" Paul obviously did not mean that Christians had discarded their physical bodies. Rather, he meant that already in the present life they were guided by spiritual rather than by worldly values (Rom 8:4-8). If Paul could speak of Christians as not being "in the flesh," already in the present life, his reference to the absence of "flesh and blood" in the Kingdom of God, simply means the absence of the natural, carnal, and sinful inclinations of the present life because the redeemed will be led fully by the Spirit.

The Meaning of the Resurrection of the Body. What, then, does "the resurrection of the body" mean? Biblical writers knew as well as we do that it could not possibly mean the rehabilitation of our present physical bodies. First, because many bodies are sick or deformed, and second, because at death they decompose and return to dust (Ps 104:29; cf. Eccl 3:20; Gen 3:19).

In the Biblical wholistic view of human nature, the term "body" is simply a synonym for "person." For example, when Paul appeals "to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God" (Rom 12:1), he is clearly thinking of the whole person. In view of this fact, to believe in the resurrection/translation of the body means to believe that my whole human self, the human being that "I" am, will be restored to life again. It means that I will not be someone different from whom I am now. I will be exclusively myself. In short, it means that God has committed Himself to preserving my individuality, personality, and character.

Central to the Biblical promise of the resurrection of the body is God's commitment to restore to life the very same individuals who existed previously on earth. God is not going to resurrect an indefinite group of look-a-like people, but the very same people who lived on this earth. The Bible reassures us of the preservation of our identity through the suggestive imagery of "books" where our "names," thoughts, attitudes, and actions are recorded (Phil 4:3; Rev 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12). A name in the Bible stands for character or personality, as indicated by the various names used to portray the character of God. This suggests that God preserves an accurate picture of the character of each person who ever lived on this planet. The record of each life is all inclusive, because Jesus said: "On the day of judgment men will render account for every careless word they utter; for by your words you will be justified and by your words you will be condemned" (Matt 12:36-37).

Each believer develops his or her own unique character as a result of the temptations, struggles, defeats, disappointments, victories, and growth in grace each one experiences. This means that the possibility of "multiple replication" of people at the resurrection, all looking, acting, and thinking alike, is inconceivable. As there are no two persons with the same DNA molecular design, so there are no two Christian characters that are the same. Each one of us has a unique character or personality that God preserves and will unite to the resurrected body.

In a society where people are often regarded as cogs in a machine, numbers in a computer, it is reassuring to know that God places a transcendent significance on our personal identity. He has written the name of each believer "before the foundation of the world in the book of life" (Rev 13:8). In the sight of God what ultimately counts are not our church affiliation, our family lineage, or our racial belonging, but the values, attitudes, and decisions that characterizes our personality.

Some Practical Implications. The practical implications of the belief in the resurrection/translation of the whole person are not difficult to see. To believe in the resurrection/translation of the body means to believe that we will be able to recognize our loved ones. We shall recognize our loved ones, not necessarily because they will look exactly the same as when we last saw them, but because their unique individuality and personality is providentially preserved and resurrected with a brand-new body given by God. When we meet elementary or high-school classmates after 20 or 30 years, most often we have difficulty in recognizing them by their external appearance. But as soon as they begin to talk, we realize who they are because their unique personalities really have not changed. They are still the Mary, the John, or the Bob we knew many years before.

The same principle applies to the recognition of our resurrected loved ones. We shall recognize them, not because they will look as young or as old as when we last saw them, but because their unique individuality and personality is providentially preserved and resurrected with a brand-new body by God.

The fact that God will restore to each of us our distinct personality and character, teaches us that our future personality is formed now. As aptly stated by Ellen G. White, "the characters formed in this life will determine the future destiny."² This important truth summons us to cultivate all the powers that God has given us in order to develop characters which are fit to serve God not only in this world but also in the world to come.

Summing up, then, people in the world to come will have physical bodies like the present ones, but without the liabilities of sin, sickness, and death. The purpose of the Plan of Redemption is not to remove defects from God's original material creation by recreating the human and sub-human creation of a different non-physical, "spiritual" substance, but to restore the whole creation to its original perfection. What was "very good" at creation will be proven to be "very good" at the final restoration.

Our next Bible study, **Endtime Issues No. 9** will focus on the actual environment and lifestyle of the redeemed. Will the new world be a material place like the present one or a "spiritual" realm radically different from this world? Will the redeemed engage in the

kind of activities we know today, or will they spend eternity in everlasting contemplation and mediation? More important still, Will they be married or single? This should prove a most interesting study.

Contact Information

Samuele Bacchiocchi, Ph. D.
Professor of Theology and Church History
Andrews University
4990 Appian Way, Berrien Springs, MI 49103

Phone (616) 471-2915 Fax (616) 471-4013
E-mail: sbacchiocchi@qtm.net or sbacchiocchi@csi.com
Web site: <http://www.biblicalperspectives.com>