The First Adam vs. The Last Adam (1 Cor. 15:42–49)

By Jacob Gerber

In the previous paragraph (v. 35–41), Paul made a number of observations about the glory of old creation to illustrate the glory of new creation. Specifically, Paul observed three principles: the principle of transformation (we will be changed), the principle of continuity (yet we will remain ourselves), and the principle of promotion (by a change of rank from our current, lower earthly glory to our future, higher heavenly glory). In that paragraph, Paul focused exclusively on how things work in old creation, dealing only in extended metaphors. There, the comparisons were implied, but now, in v. 42–49, Paul makes the comparisons explicit, beginning with the transition sentence: “So it is with the resurrection of the dead” (v. 42a). In this section, Paul explains how Christ equips us for full fellowship with God.

Christ Exalts Our Nature (1 Cor. 15:42–44)

From the outset, we need to keep one key principle in focus: Paul is not contrasting fallen old creation against the new creation, but the original old creation, before the Fall, against the final form of the new creation. Paul does not make this principle explicit until v. 45–49, when Paul contrasts Adam against Christ. In v. 45, though, Paul writes “thus” (or, “so”), the same word Paul uses in v. 42. In both locations, Paul uses this conjunction to explain the point of what he had previously written. So, in v. 42, Paul is making the comparison between old creation and new creation explicit. In v. 45, Paul is identifying the specific subject he has been writing about in all the “what is sown” statements.

In v. 45, then, Paul identifies his subject by quoting Genesis 2:7, “The first man Adam became a living being.” Importantly, we must remember that Genesis 2:7 is about Adam’s original creation, before the Fall.

So, when Paul’s repeatedly writes of “what is sown” in v. 42–44, he is not referring to dead bodies, sown as seeds into their graves, as many commentators take these statements.¹ This seems to make a good deal of sense at first, but the interpretation falls apart when we reach v. 44, where Paul says that what is sown is a “natural” body. This is a hard phrase to translate, but the basic idea is that the “natural” (ψυχικόν; psychikon) body is characterized by the indwelling of the soul (ψυχή; psyche).² (We will return to this question a bit later.) Death, however, separates the soul from the body, so that a dead body buried in the ground is characterized by the absence, not the presence, of an indwelling soul.³ Some commentators try to get around this problem by suggesting that Paul is speaking of the

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¹ e.g., “Thus σπείρεται, ‘it is sown,’ is to be understood figuratively: the dead body is buried in the grave.” (Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians, 711.)

² Hays, First Corinthians, 272.

³ Garland, 1 Corinthians, 733.
(dead) body as it was characterized by the indwelling of a soul during life. Nevertheless, this explanation undercuts the point that commentators are trying to make, since it points back to the life of the ensouled body, and not to its death.

For these reasons, it is better to understand that when Paul writes of “what is sown” in v. 42–44, he is describing the origins of the whole human race at the creation of Adam. Or, to put this another way, the “sowing” does not refer to the conception of each individual human being who has ever lived, but rather to the creation of the original human being, Adam, from whom all other human beings are descended. Paul is saying that Adam was sown (i.e., created) perishable, in dishonor, in weakness, and with a “natural” (i.e., ensouled) body, in contrast to Christ, who was raised imperishable, in glory, in power, and with a “spiritual” body.

Now, we must acknowledge that this interpretation has its own difficulty. Namely, how do we say that Adam was created perishable, in dishonor, and in weakness before the Fall? Death was not a part of God's original design, so what do we mean by saying that Adam was sown “perishable”? Psalm 8:5 insists that Adam was “crowned with glory and honor,” so what do we mean by saying that Adam was sown “in dishonor”? At creation, God gave Adam and Eve dominion over all creation (Gen. 1:26–28), so what do we mean by saying that Adam was sown “in weakness”?

To answer this question, we must first recognize that Adam was indeed created with a glory, but with an earthly glory that falls short of the heavenly glory that Christ now offers (v. 40, 47–49). In what sense, then, does Adam’s earthly glory fall short of Christ’s heavenly glory? The creation narrative in Genesis 2 describes Adam’s glory as provisional and incomplete by the symbolism of the two special trees in the garden of Eden. By the first tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Adam was given a test when God commanded him not to eat of that tree (Gen. 2:17). If Adam passed the test by his “personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience,” then Adam would receive a reward. The second tree, the tree of life, was a “pledge” of the promised reward of eternal life (cf. Gen. 3:22). Theologians describe this probationary test in two ways: first, as a covenant of works, to underscore the requirement; and second, as a covenant of life, to underscore the promised reward. Therefore, if Adam had passed the test and completed the obligations of his probation, the Scriptures suggest that Adam would have been promoted by his obedience from an earthly glory to a heavenly glory.

Obviously, Adam did not obey. As the rest of the Bible teaches, Adam failed to keep the covenant that God established with him (cf. Hos. 6:7), and so he forfeited the promise of eternal, heavenly life. For this reason, God barred him from eating of the tree of life (Gen. 3:22). But while the story of Adam’s ultimate failure is true, that failure is not actually Paul’s point here. Paul is not speaking of Adam’s Fall, but of Adam’s original condition, where he possessed an earthly (not a

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4 E.g., Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians, 713–15.
5 Garland, 1 Corinthians, 733.
6 Westminster Larger Catechism, #20.
7 Ibid.
8 For “covenant of works,” see Westminster Confession of Faith, 7.2; 19.1, and Westminster Larger Catechism, #30. For “covenant of life,” see Westminster Larger Catechism, #20, and Westminster Shorter Catechism, #12. The terms are used interchangeably.
9 Hodge, A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians, 349.
heavenly) glory. Again, it is this earthly glory that Paul says was sown perishable, in dishonor, and in weakness.

How, then, can Paul say all of these things about Adam’s original state when he was created? Charles Hodge answers this question well:

> It is evident from the entire history, that Adam was formed for an existence on this earth, and therefore with a body adapted to the present state of being; in its essential attributes not differing from those which we have inherited from him. He was indeed created immortal. Had he not sinned, he would not have been subject to death. For death is the wages of sin. And as Paul elsewhere teaches, death is by sin. From what the apostle, however, here says of the contrast between Adam and Christ; of the earthly and perishable nature of the former as opposed to the immortal, spiritual nature of the latter, it is plain that Adam as originally created was not, as to his body, in that state which would fit him for his immortal existence. After his period of probation was passed, it is to be inferred, that a change in him would have taken place, analogous to that which is to take place in those believers who shall be alive when Christ comes. They shall not die, but they shall be changed. Of this change in the constitution of his body, the tree of life was probably constituted the sacrament. For when he sinned, he was excluded from the garden of Eden, “lest he put forth his hand and take of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever,” Gen. 3, 22. Some change, therefore, was to take place in his body, to adapt it to live for ever.10

Adam was not liable to death until he sinned, but Adam’s body, as originally created, was not fit for eternal life. His body was perishable, fit for earthly life, not heavenly. In contrast to the heavenly glory that Adam would have received, his body was sown without that kind of honor. Furthermore, his body was weak, incapable of living forever. If Adam had succeeded, he would not have remained in the same form, but his body would have been transformed into the heavenly glory that we may now gain through Christ.

**Christ Endows us With Life (1 Cor. 15:45–46)**

Along these lines, the critical contrast Paul is drawing in this passage is between the “natural body” and the “spiritual body.” This is not a distinction between the physical and the nonphysical.11 Both Adam’s body and Christ’s body were physical, and Christ went to great lengths to demonstrate that he had retained a physical body after his resurrection (e.g., Luke 24:39–43; John 20:20, 27). The distinction is rather between those who are merely fitted for earthly life by an earthly “soul” (ψυχή; psyche) versus those who are fitted for heavenly life by a heavenly “spirit” (πνεῦμα; pneuma). To understand this distinction, we must remember that Paul clearly differentiated these two kinds of people earlier in 1 Corinthians 2:14–15:12 “The natural [ψυχικὸς; psychikos] person does not accept the things of the Spirit [πνεύματος; pneumatos] of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able

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12 Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 869.
to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person [πνευματικός; pneumatikos] judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one.” The “natural” person is fitted for life in this world only, living entirely according to what can be experienced and understood with our physical senses. By this definition, we may understand why the animals too are called “living beings” (v. 45; cf. Gen. 1:21, 24; 2:7: יָהַחַשֶפֶנ; nephesh chayyah)—they are fitted for life in this world. Certainly, natural human beings have higher capacities than the animals, but both are fitted for the things of this world.

By contrast, the “spiritual” person has the capacity for fellowship with the Spirit, the Holy Spirit of God. The spiritual person cannot ignore this world, but neither does the spiritual person believe that this world is of ultimate importance. Therefore, when Paul speaks of our spiritual bodies (1 Cor. 15:44), he does not mean that they are nonphysical, but that they are perfectly fitted for eternal fellowship with God. Adam was the original bearer of the body fitted for earthly glory, while Christ (“the last Adam”; vs. 45) was the original bearer of the body fitted for heavenly glory. God’s plan has always been to promote human beings from the earthly glory to a heavenly glory, first the one and then the other (v. 46). The earthly, probationary state in which Adam was created was a prelude to, or preparation for, the heavenly glory that God had chosen as the ultimate state of his people. But, where Adam forfeited that promotion, Christ has secured it for us. Christ is not only a living being, but he is the life-giving spirit (v. 45).

**Christ Equips us for Full Fellowship with God (1 Cor. 15:47–49)**

In the final verses of this section, Paul restates and applies what he has already taught. The first man, Adam, was fitted for life on earth, himself being made from the dust of the earth (v. 47a). The second man, was fitted for heavenly life (v. 47b). The phrase “from heaven” does not refer to the origin of Christ from heaven, but of the fact that his humanity was fitted for heavenly life by his resurrection from the dead. Indeed, while Christ was not liable to death because of sin, he was nevertheless born with a perishable body fit for earthly life, so that he could die. In his current state, fit for heavenly glory, Christ cannot die again: “I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades” (Rev. 1:18).

We, then, share the natures of these two archetypes of earthly and heavenly humanity. If we are of the dust, then we are like the man of dust, and if we are of heaven, then we are like the man of heaven (v. 48). Then, to clarify, Paul states that as we now have born the image of the man of dust, so we shall (in the future) bear the image of the man of heaven (v. 49). At the resurrection of the dead, our bodies will be transformed from their lowly condition to the be made like the heavenly glory of

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13 Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 872–73.
14 Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 351.
15 “There is a history of interpretation that sees these clauses as referring to the origin of Adam and Christ. That is, the first man’s origin is ‘from the earth,’ therefore he is ‘earthly,’ while the second man ‘comes from heaven’ and is therefore ‘heavenly.’ More likely, however, these prepositions, which have come about by way of Gen. 2, are intended to be synonyms of psychikos and pneumatikos and are thus intended to be qualitative, having to do with human life that is characterized by being either ‘of earth’ or ‘of heaven.’” (Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 876–77.)
Christ’s resurrected body (cf. Phil. 3:21). When that happens, we will be fitted not for life in this world, but for life in the new heavens and the new earth.

Discussion Questions

1. What does the Bible tell us about human nature, as God originally created it to be (cf. Gen. 1–2)? How does the Bible describe both animals and humans as equipped for earthly life, by the term “living beings” (Gen. 1:21, 24; 2:7)? How does Paul’s word “natural” (v. 44, 45, 46) help us to understand the natural, earthly, existence that Adam was originally equipped for at his creation?

2. In what sense was Adam’s natural, earthly nature sown “perishable,” “in dishonor,” and “in weakness” (v. 42–43)? Why did Adam need to be raised “imperishable,” “in glory,” and “in power”? When theologians speak of the covenant of works/life, how does this concept help us to understand not only the duty of “personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience,” but also the promise of being raised to a higher form of human nature? Did Adam succeed in keeping that covenant?

3. Since Adam failed to keep his covenant, by what means has God provided for us to gain imperishable, glorious, and powerful natures? How does Paul get at this by describing Christ, “the last Adam,” as a “life-giving spirit” (v. 45)? If “spiritual body” (v. 44) and “life-giving spirit” do not refer to nonphysical bodies, what does spirit/spiritual mean in this context? In what sense has God already given us this spiritual nature? In what sense are we still awaiting it?