

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

ANTHROPOLOGY

The Doctrine of Humanity

Created, Fallen, and Redeemable — What It Means to Be Human Before God

UNIT 2

The Creation of Humanity

Lesson 5

The Goodness of Creation

The Material World Affirmed

“Against Gnosticism, Against Materialism — The Biblical View of the Body”

Key Texts: Genesis 1:31; 1 Corinthians 6:19–20; 15:42–49; Romans 8:23; Philippians 3:20–21

“God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good.”

Genesis 1:31, NASB 1995

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Introduction

At the close of the sixth day of creation, God surveys the entirety of what He has made and pronounces upon it a verdict of superlative goodness: “God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31, NASB 1995). This divine evaluation is not a minor detail; it is a foundational theological statement about the character of the created order and the relationship of the Creator to His creation. The material world — the world of atoms and soil, of stars and seas, of animal bodies and human flesh, is declared very good by the God who made it. It is not a deficient reflection of a higher spiritual reality. It is not a prison from which the soul must one day escape. It is not a morally neutral substrate for the immaterial self to inhabit temporarily while it waits for liberation. It is good, good in itself, good in its design, good in its purpose, and good in the estimation of its Maker.

This declaration confronts the church with two opposite errors that have tempted every generation of believers and that are both very much alive in the contemporary moment. The first is the error of Gnosticism and its theological cousin Platonism: the view that the material world is inferior, suspect, or hostile to the life of the spirit, and that genuine spiritual existence requires the progressive detachment of the soul from its material entanglements. In this family of errors, the body is a burden, matter is a problem, and salvation is the liberation of the immaterial self from the contaminating influence of physical existence. The second error is the opposite extreme: materialism, the view that the body is all there is, that the immaterial soul is either a fiction or a mere epiphenomenon of physical processes, and that human identity is exhaustively constituted by biological reality. Neither error honors the testimony of Genesis 1:31, and neither honors the full witness of Scripture about what it means to be an embodied creature who possesses an immaterial soul.

Lesson 5 addresses both errors directly, marshaling the biblical testimony for the goodness of the material creation, the irreplaceable importance of the body in human identity, and the theological affirmations that protect the church’s doctrine of the body from both Gnostic despising and materialist reductionism. The lesson proceeds in six movements. We begin with the divine verdict of Genesis 1:31 and its theological content. We then examine the Gnostic and Platonic errors and the patristic church’s response to them. From there we address the materialist error and the scriptural affirmation of the immaterial soul. The fourth and fifth sections present the two supreme biblical affirmations of the goodness of the body: the Incarnation of the Son of God and the resurrection of the body. We close with the ethical and eschatological implications of the doctrine: because the body is good, it matters how we treat it, and because the body will be raised, the hope of the Christian extends not beyond the body but through and with the body into the glory of the new creation.

This lesson occupies a pivotal position in the Anthropology series. The previous four lessons have established that humanity was specially created by God (Lesson 3), that male and female together constitute the full image of God (Lesson 4), and that the relational constitution of human beings is built into the creation (Lesson 4). This lesson addresses the question of the material dimension of human existence, what the body is, why it matters, and what its destiny is, which is foundational for the lessons on the constitution of human nature (Unit 4, Lessons 11–13) and the resurrection and glorification of the body that will be treated in Unit 9.

I. Very Good: The Divine Verdict on the Material World

What Genesis 1:31 Establishes and What Depends Upon It

A. *The Weight of ‘Very Good’*

The word “good” (tov, טוב) appears seven times in Genesis 1, applied to the successive acts of the creative week, and each occurrence carries the force of a divine evaluation: God looks at what He has made and pronounces it to be as it should be, aligned with His purposes, fit for its function, and pleasing in His sight. But the verdict of Genesis 1:31 is distinguished from all the preceding “good” declarations by the addition of the adverb “very” (me’od, מאד): not merely good but very good, not merely adequate but superlatively excellent. And the object of this superlative verdict is not merely the creation of humanity in the image of God, though that is included; it is the entirety of what God has made: “God saw all that He had made.” The material universe, light and darkness, sea and land, vegetation and stars, fish and birds and beasts and the human creature made from the dust, the whole of it receives the divine verdict of very good.

The theological implications of this verdict are substantial and reach into virtually every domain of Christian thought and practice. First, it establishes the ontological goodness of matter as such: the physical world, including the physical body, is not merely instrumentally good (useful for spiritual purposes that transcend it) but intrinsically good (good in its own creaturely existence, as the kind of thing it is). The dust from which Adam was formed, the rib from which Eve was fashioned, the embodied existence of the human creature who emerges from the creative acts of Genesis 2, all of this is very good, because God made it and declared it so. Second, it establishes that the Creator is not embarrassed by or estranged from the material order; He looks at it with approval, even delight, as one who has invested His creative power in it and finds it pleasing. Third, it establishes the baseline goodness of creation against which the fall must be measured: what the fall corrupts is not an already compromised or inferior material world but a world that God has declared very good, which means the corruption of the fall is a genuine tragedy, a real departure from an original excellence, and not merely the working out of a structural deficiency inherent in materiality itself.

The Sabbath rest of Genesis 2:1–3 is the liturgical seal on the very good verdict of Genesis 1:31. When God rests on the seventh day and blesses and sanctifies it, He is not resting from exhaustion; He is resting as an artisan who surveys completed work and finds it excellent. The Sabbath is the created order’s moment of self-contemplation in the presence of its Maker, the day on which the creature, created very good and sustained by the ongoing creative power of God, pauses to receive the goodness of its own existence as a gift. The Sabbath institution thus encodes within the structure of the created week a perpetual reminder that existence as a material creature is good, that the world God has made is worthy of his rest and ours, and that the proper creaturely response to the goodness of creation is neither the Gnostic’s anxiety to escape it nor the materialist’s idolatrous attachment to it, but the worshipper’s grateful reception of it as the very good gift of the very good God.

B. *The Goodness of the Human Body in Particular*

Within the general declaration of Genesis 1:31, the goodness of the human body in particular deserves specific attention, because it is the human body, more than any other material thing, that the history of theology has been tempted to regard with suspicion, contempt, or ambivalence. The human body is the locus of desire, and desire is the source of much sin; it is the source of pain, aging, and death; it is apparently the inferior partner in the body-soul compound, the element that drags the spiritual self toward earthly concerns and away from the heavenly ones. The temptation to regard the body as a problem rather than a gift is perennial, and it is a temptation that has been reinforced in different ways by Platonic philosophy, Gnostic religion, certain strands of Christian asceticism, and, in our own moment, the therapeutic culture’s reduction of human identity to subjective psychological states that the body either expresses or constrains.

But the biblical testimony on the goodness of the human body is unambiguous and theologically grounded. The body is not an afterthought to the creation of the human creature; it is constitutive of what the human creature is. Adam does not receive a body as a temporary housing for a soul that existed prior to its embodiment; he becomes a living being, a unified, embodied personal existence, precisely when the divine breath animates the body formed from the dust. The human creature is not a soul that has a body; it is, in the full biblical sense, an embodied soul or a besouled body, a unity of material and immaterial dimensions whose integrity as a person requires both. This is why the death that separates the soul from the body at the end of mortal life is treated in Scripture not as liberation but as loss, not as a graduation to a superior mode of existence but as an abnormal rupture of the unity that God created and that the resurrection will restore and surpass.

The very good verdict of Genesis 1:31 is confirmed and deepened by what follows in the redemptive narrative. The tabernacle and the temple, structures of extraordinary material beauty, adorned with gold and silver and acacia wood and precious stones and finely woven linen, are not embarrassments to a religion that would prefer to worship a purely spiritual God in a purely spiritual mode; they are the divinely commanded means by which the material creation is brought into the service of the worship of its Maker, and their beauty is a reflection of the very good quality of the material from which they are constructed. The food laws, the agricultural festivals, the anointing of oil and the burning of incense, the bread of the Presence and the water of purification, the entire ritual life of Israel is a perpetual affirmation that the material world is not the enemy of the spiritual life but its indispensable medium. And the Incarnation and the Resurrection, the two supreme biblical affirmations of the goodness of the body, to which the fourth and fifth sections of this lesson are devoted, are the definitive confirmation that the very good verdict of Genesis 1:31 has not been revoked by the fall and will not be superseded by the consummation of all things.

“Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.”

1 Corinthians 6:19–20, NASB 1995

II. Against Gnosticism: The Body Is Not a Prison

How the Church Defended the Goodness of Matter Against Its Most Persistent Theological Adversary

A. The Gnostic Error and Its Roots

Gnosticism, the complex family of religious and philosophical movements that flourished in the first through fourth centuries of the Christian era, and that has recurred in various forms throughout the history of Western thought, represents the most sustained and the most theologically sophisticated challenge to the biblical doctrine of the goodness of creation. While Gnostic systems varied enormously in their specific cosmologies, mythologies, and soteriologies, they were united by a common anthropological conviction: that the human being’s true identity is a divine spark or spiritual essence temporarily imprisoned in the inferior, corrupt, and alien medium of material existence, and that salvation consists in the liberation of this spiritual essence from its material prison through the acquisition of esoteric knowledge (gnosis) about its true origin and destiny. On this account, the material world is not very good; it is the product of an inferior or malevolent demiurge, a realm of darkness and corruption from which the enlightened soul seeks escape rather than redemption.

The Gnostic contempt for matter produced a characteristic anthropology: the human being’s true self is wholly spiritual, wholly non-material, wholly other than the body in which it finds itself embedded. The body is not the human person; it is the human person’s problem. Gnostic soteriology was accordingly docetic in its Christology, it could not affirm that the Son of God had truly taken on human flesh, because for the Gnostic, the flesh was

precisely what the divine nature must not and cannot become. The Christ of Gnosticism only appeared to have a body; the Incarnation was an appearance, not an event; the Crucifixion was a spiritual transaction that took place above and beyond the material plane on which it seemed to occur. And the resurrection of the body was, for the Gnostic, not the Christian hope but its perverse antithesis: why would the liberated soul desire to return to the very prison from which it had been freed?

The influence of Gnostic and Platonic assumptions about the body did not disappear when the church condemned Gnosticism; it persisted in attenuated forms throughout the history of Christian thought, and it persists today in the assumptions of much popular Christianity about what happens at death, what heaven is like, and what the Christian hope actually entails. The popular imagination that heaven is a disembodied state in which the soul floats on clouds and plays harps for eternity, an imagination that owes far more to Plato than to Paul, is a Gnostic residue in Christian culture that the doctrine of the very good creation and the resurrection of the body must continually correct. When the New Testament speaks of the Christian hope, it does not speak of the soul's escape from the body into a purely spiritual mode of existence; it speaks of the resurrection of the body, the renewal of the created order, and the dwelling of God with His people in the new heavens and the new earth. The Gnostic hope is the negation of matter; the Christian hope is the transformation of matter by the power of the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead.

B. Irenaeus and the Patristic Defense of Material Goodness

The most theologically sophisticated and exegetically grounded response to Gnosticism in the patristic era was produced by Irenaeus of Lyon (c. 130–202 AD) in his five-volume work *Against Heresies* (*Adversus Haereses*). Irenaeus's great contribution to the doctrine of creation and the doctrine of the body was his insistence, against every form of Gnostic dualism, that the Creator God of the Old Testament and the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ are one and the same God, and that therefore the material creation is not the product of an inferior demiurge but the purposeful work of the God who declared it very good. The body, on Irenaeus's account, is not the prison from which the soul must escape; it is part of the human creature's genuine identity as a being made in the image and likeness of God, and its redemption, its resurrection and glorification, is not an embarrassment to the gospel but its necessary conclusion. The salvation that Christ accomplishes is not the liberation of the soul from the body but the redemption of the whole person, body and soul together, from the corruption that sin has introduced into the very good creation.

Irenaeus's recapitulation theology, his account of Christ as the second Adam who recapitulates and reverses in His own person the entire history of the first Adam and his posterity, has a material dimension that is directly relevant to the doctrine of the goodness of the body. When the Son of God takes on human flesh in the Incarnation, Irenaeus argues, He does not merely provide a spiritual model for humanity to imitate; He actually takes up the human condition, body and soul, dust and breath, into His own divine person, and by living that human life perfectly, suffering that human death obediently, and rising from the dead in a genuinely physical resurrection, He recapitulates and redeems the entire embodied human existence that Adam had corrupted. The Incarnation is the ultimate vindication of the material creation precisely because it is the Creator Himself who becomes material, who takes on the dust He formed and the breath He imparted and wears them as His own, not temporarily but permanently, not as a concession to creaturely limitation but as an eternal expression of the love that moved Him to become what we are so that we might become what He is.

The patristic response to Gnosticism established several permanent theological affirmations that the Reformed tradition inherits and upholds. First, the unity of the Creator God of the Old and New Testaments: there is no inferior demiurge responsible for the material world; the God who made the dust is the God who became dust in Jesus of Nazareth, and the God who declared creation very good is the God who will remake it very good in the new heavens and the new earth. Second, the essential role of the body in human identity: the human person is not a soul that has a body but a unified, embodied personal existence whose material dimension is as genuinely constitutive of personal identity as its immaterial dimension. Third, the resurrection of the body as the Christian

hope: the goal of redemption is not the escape of the immaterial soul from the material body but the resurrection and transformation of the whole person in the power of the Spirit, in conformity to the resurrection body of the Last Adam. These affirmations, hammered out against Gnosticism in the second century, are as urgently needed in the twenty-first century as they were in the second, because the Gnostic error in its various contemporary forms has not ceased its assault on the doctrine of the goodness of the body.

III. Against Materialism: The Body Is Not All There Is

The Scriptural Affirmation of the Immaterial Soul Against the Reductionism of Our Age

A. The Materialist Error and Its Contemporary Forms

If Gnosticism errs by despising the body and locating human identity entirely in the immaterial soul, materialism errs in the opposite direction by denying the immaterial soul altogether and locating human identity entirely in the body, or more precisely, in the physical processes of the brain and nervous system. The materialist account of the human person is the default anthropology of the secular academy, the medical establishment, and the therapeutic culture, and it takes forms both crude and sophisticated. In its crudest form, it is the commonsense naturalism that identifies the person with the brain, treats consciousness as the product of neural activity, and expects that the comprehensive scientific understanding of the brain will eventually yield a comprehensive understanding of everything we mean by “mind,” “soul,” “person,” and “self.” In its more sophisticated philosophical form, it is the physicalism of contemporary philosophy of mind, which holds that mental states are identical to or entirely supervene upon physical states, and that there is therefore no room for a genuinely immaterial dimension of human existence.

The contemporary gender ideology represents a curious and revealing hybrid of Gnostic and materialist assumptions that is worth pausing to examine, because it illustrates how the same rejection of Genesis 1:31’s affirmation of the very good creation can produce apparently opposite conclusions. On the one hand, gender ideology is materialist in its reduction of biological sex to a morally neutral physical substrate: the body’s chromosomes, anatomy, and reproductive function are mere biological facts without intrinsic moral or personal significance. On the other hand, it is Gnostic in its elevation of psychological gender identity over the physical body: the true self is the inner psychological reality, and the body is an arbitrary container that may or may not correspond to that true self and that can and should be modified to conform to it. The result is an anthropology in which neither the body nor the soul, in the biblical sense, is honored: the body is reduced to morally neutral matter, and the soul is replaced by a subjective psychological self that is its own highest authority. Neither the Gnostic contempt for the body nor the materialist reduction of the self to the body honors what Genesis 1:31 declares about the goodness of the material creation or what Genesis 2:7 declares about the constitution of the human creature as a unified embodied soul.

The church’s response to materialism must be as theologically rigorous and as exegetically grounded as its response to Gnosticism. Against the materialist reduction of the self to the brain, the Scriptures consistently bear witness to an immaterial dimension of the human person, called variously soul (nephesh, נֶפֶשׁ; psyche, ψυχή), spirit (ruach, רוּחַ; pneuma, πνεῦμα), or the inner man (ho eso anthropos, Ephesians 3:16; 2 Corinthians 4:16), that is genuinely distinct from the body, capable of existing in a conscious intermediate state when separated from the body at death, and constitutive of personal identity in ways that cannot be reduced to physical processes. The doctrine of the intermediate state, the teaching that the souls of the righteous are immediately at death in the presence of Christ (Philippians 1:23; 2 Corinthians 5:8; Luke 23:43), while awaiting the resurrection of the body that will restore the full integrity of the embodied person, is incompatible with materialism in every form and is the primary biblical evidence for the irreducibility of the immaterial dimension of human existence.

B. The Immaterial Soul: Biblical Evidence and Theological Significance

The biblical evidence for the immaterial soul is woven throughout the Old and New Testaments in ways that resist the materialist reduction. In Ecclesiastes 12:7, the Preacher describes the death of the human being in terms that explicitly distinguish the material and immaterial dimensions of the person: “then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it” (NASB 1995). The parallel structure, dust returns to earth, spirit returns to God, is a direct echo of the creation narrative of Genesis 2:7, in which the body is formed from the dust and the life-principle is given by the divine breath. The dissolution of the body at death and the return of the spirit to God is the reversal of the creative act, and the fact that the spirit is said to return to God implies both that it is genuinely distinct from the body and that it does not simply cease to exist when the body does.

In the New Testament, Jesus’s own words establish the distinction between body and soul with characteristic directness: “Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28, NASB 1995). The distinction drawn here, between those who can kill the body but not the soul, and the One who can destroy both, presupposes that the soul is a genuinely distinct entity from the body, capable of surviving the body’s death while remaining subject to the judgment of God. Paul’s account of his own experience in 2 Corinthians 5:1–8 describes the dissolution of the earthly “tent” of the body and the prospect of being “absent from the body and at home with the Lord” (v. 8, NASB 1995) in a way that presupposes a conscious personal existence between death and resurrection that is not identical to the body but is nonetheless genuinely the same person who lived in the body. And Philippians 1:21–23, in which Paul expresses his desire to depart and be with Christ, which he calls “very much better”, presupposes a personal, conscious, relational existence with Christ between death and resurrection that is not the annihilation or unconsciousness that materialism requires.

The theological significance of the immaterial soul for the doctrine of the goodness of creation is counterintuitive but important. The affirmation of the immaterial soul does not imply, as the Gnostic might suppose, that the body is inferior or dispensable; it implies precisely the opposite. Because the human person is genuinely both body and soul, a unity of material and immaterial dimensions whose integrity requires both, the separation of the soul from the body at death is a genuine loss rather than a liberation, and the reunion of soul and body in the resurrection is a genuine restoration rather than a reluctant return to an inferior state. The Christian doctrine of the immaterial soul is not a concession to Gnosticism; it is the precondition for a properly Christian eschatology in which the resurrection of the body is the hope of the church rather than its embarrassment. You cannot properly affirm the resurrection of the body without first affirming that there is a soul capable of surviving the body’s death and being reunited with it at the last day.

“For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.”

Philippians 3:20–21, NASB 1995

IV. The Incarnation: God’s Ultimate Affirmation of the Material World

What It Means That the Son of God Became Flesh and Remains Flesh Forever

A. The Word Became Flesh: The Theological Significance of the Incarnation for the Doctrine of the Body

The supreme biblical affirmation of the goodness of the material world, the affirmation that dwarfs every other argument for the dignity and worth of bodily, creaturely existence, is the Incarnation of the eternal Son of God. “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the

Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14, NASB 1995). The Greek word translated “flesh” is *sarx* (σὰρξ), the same word Paul uses in Romans 8 and Galatians for the corrupted, sinful, fallen human nature. When John says that the Word became *sarx*, he is not speaking of a polite spiritual approximation of human embodiment; he is affirming that the eternal, uncreated, divine Son of God took on real, physical, material human flesh, the kind of flesh that hungers and thirsts, that bleeds and weeps, that grows weary and needs sleep, that can be touched and held and nailed to a cross.

The Incarnation is the Creator entering His creation as a creature, the immortal becoming mortal, the infinite taking on the finitude of a human body gestated in a human womb over nine months, born in the discomfort of a stable, subject to the ordinary physical vulnerabilities of creaturely existence. This is not a temporary excursion into an alien element from which the Son of God subsequently returns gratefully to a purely spiritual mode of existence; it is a permanent identification with the human condition in all its material specificity. The Nicene Creed’s affirmation that the Son of God “was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became human”, and the theological tradition’s insistence that this incarnation is permanent, that the risen and ascended Christ remains forever the incarnate Son, “the same Jesus” whose physical body ascended to the right hand of the Father (Acts 1:11), is the most radical possible affirmation of the goodness of material human existence. If the Son of God not only assumed a body but retains that body in glory forever, then the body is not a problem to be solved but a permanent feature of redeemed creaturely existence.

The Incarnation also addresses the Gnostic error at its most fundamental point: the claim that the material and the divine cannot coexist in genuine unity without contamination of the divine by the material. The Chalcedonian definition, that Christ is one person in two natures, truly divine and truly human, without confusion, change, division, or separation, is the church’s answer to this claim. The divine nature is not corrupted by its union with human flesh; the human nature is not destroyed by its union with the divine person. The Incarnation demonstrates that the Creator can enter His creation without the creation contaminating Him, and that He can do so precisely because the creation is genuinely good, because the very good verdict of Genesis 1:31 is not a naive assessment of an ontologically inferior realm but an accurate evaluation of a material world whose goodness is real enough to serve as the medium of the divine self-disclosure in the person of the Son.

B. *He Retains the Body: The Permanence of the Incarnation*

The theological tradition has been careful to insist, against every Gnostic and quasi-Gnostic tendency, that the Incarnation is not a temporary episode in the eternal life of the Son of God that ends with the Ascension. The risen Christ who appears to His disciples in the upper room, who invites Thomas to touch the wounds in His hands and side, who eats broiled fish with His disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, who is carried up into heaven before the watching disciples of Acts 1, is not a spiritual apparition. He is the same Jesus whose body was buried in Joseph’s tomb, whose tomb was found empty on the first day of the week, and whose resurrection body is genuinely physical, capable of being touched, capable of eating, occupying space, while also being glorified and transformed in ways that transcend the limitations of the pre-resurrection body. This risen, glorified, physical body is the body that He carries with Him into the Ascension and that He retains at the right hand of the Father.

The Heidelberg Catechism’s treatment of the Ascension (Q. 49) makes this point with characteristic theological precision: the Ascension means that Christ has entered heaven “in our flesh” as our advocate before the Father. The human nature of Christ, body and soul, is now at the right hand of the Father, which means that human nature, material, embodied, creaturely human nature, has been permanently elevated to the highest position in the created order. The Son of God who became the Son of Man remains the Son of Man forever, not as a concession to creaturely limitation but as the permanent expression of the love that moved Him to become what we are. And this permanent incarnation is the ground of the Christian’s confidence in the resurrection of her own body: if the head has been raised and glorified in His body, the members of the body will be raised and glorified in theirs. The permanence of the Incarnation is the first fruits of the harvest of the resurrection, and the harvest is the resurrection of all who are in Christ.

The practical implications of the permanence of the Incarnation for the everyday bodily life of the Christian are developed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:12–20 in ways that are as provocative as they are clear. “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?” (v. 19, NASB 1995). The body of the Christian is the temple of the Holy Spirit, which is to say, the locus of God’s dwelling presence in the world, the material medium through which the glory of God is displayed in creaturely existence. This is not a metaphor that softens the claims of the material world; it is a theological affirmation that magnifies them. The body’s goodness is not merely the goodness of something that God made; it is the goodness of something that God now inhabits. And the conclusion Paul draws from this affirmation is practical and demanding: “Therefore glorify God in your body” (v. 20, NASB 1995). The body is the instrument of the Christian’s worship, the medium of her discipleship, and the locus of her sanctification. To despise the body or to use it in ways that contradict its goodness and dignity is not an expression of spiritual freedom; it is a denial of the very good verdict that God has pronounced upon it and a failure to honor the Spirit who dwells within it.

V. The Resurrection: The Final Vindication of the Body

The Christian Hope Is Not Escape from the Body but Transformation of the Body

A. The Resurrection Body in 1 Corinthians 15

The fifteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians is the most extended and most theologically comprehensive treatment of the resurrection of the body in the entire New Testament, and it stands as the primary biblical text for the Christian doctrine of the eschatological destiny of the human body. Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians 15 is not merely apologetic, not merely a defense of the possibility of bodily resurrection against Greek philosophical skepticism, but dogmatic and doxological: the resurrection of the body is the necessary conclusion of the gospel of Christ crucified and raised, and the hope it provides is the foundation of Christian ethical life in the present. “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins” (v. 17, NASB 1995). The resurrection is not a peripheral doctrinal addition to the gospel; it is the gospel’s own necessary conclusion.

Paul’s description of the resurrection body in 1 Corinthians 15:42–49 employs four contrasting pairs to distinguish the pre-resurrection body from the resurrection body: perishable/imperishable, dishonor/glory, weakness/power, natural/spiritual. The contrast is not between material and immaterial; the resurrection body is not a ghostly spiritual substance. It is the contrast between the present mode of embodied existence, which is subject to mortality, corruption, and the weakness of a body under the curse of sin, and the future mode of embodied existence, which will be raised in the power of the Spirit, conformed to the body of Christ’s glory, and freed from every limitation that mortality imposes. The “spiritual body” (*soma pneumatikon*, v. 44) of the resurrection is not a body that has become spirit; it is a body that has been fully animated and transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit, a body as genuinely material as the present body, but glorified, perfected, and freed from every creaturely limitation by the creative power of the God who raised Jesus from the dead.

The Adam-Christ typology that Paul develops in 1 Corinthians 15:45–49 brings the doctrine of the resurrection body into direct connection with the creation of Adam in Genesis 2:7: “The first man, Adam, became a living soul. The last Adam became a life-giving spirit” (v. 45, NASB 1995). The contrast is not between the material and the spiritual but between the psychical (relating to the natural life of the soul) and the pneumatic (relating to the life-giving power of the Spirit). Adam in his original creation was a “living being”, a genuine embodied personal existence animated by the divine breath; the Last Adam, in His resurrection, is a “life-giving spirit”, the source of the resurrection life that He pours out on all who are in Him. And the conclusion Paul draws in verse 49 is both a declaration and a promise: “just as we have borne the image of the earthly, we will also bear the image of the heavenly.” The resurrection body will bear the image of the risen Christ as surely as the present body bears the image of the fallen Adam, and it will bear that image as a genuinely material, genuinely physical, genuinely embodied form of human existence, not despite its physicality but through it and in it and as it.

B. Romans 8:23 and the Groaning of Creation

Romans 8:23 situates the hope of the resurrection of the body within the broader eschatological framework of the renewal of the entire created order: “And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body” (NASB 1995). The groaning of the Christian, the ache of finitude and mortality, the experience of physical suffering, aging, and death, is not the groaning of a soul that wants to escape from its body; it is the groaning of an embodied creature who longs for the redemption of the body that the resurrection will bring. The first fruits of the Spirit, the regenerating, sanctifying, indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer, are the first installment of the full harvest of resurrection, and they create in the believer not a desire for disembodied spiritual existence but an eager longing for the full redemption of the embodied person that the gospel promises.

The broader context of Romans 8:18–25 places the redemption of the body within the cosmic scope of God’s redemptive purposes. The entire creation, subjected to futility because of Adam’s sin (v. 20), groans together in labor pains as it waits for the revealing of the sons of God (v. 19), which is to say, the resurrection and glorification of the redeemed, which will also be the liberation of the created order from its bondage to corruption. The Christian hope is not the escape of the soul from the material world into a purely spiritual realm; it is the redemption of the body and the renewal of the creation, the transformation of the very good creation that sin has corrupted back into something that surpasses even its original excellence, by the power of the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead. This is the eschatological vision that undergirds the very good verdict of Genesis 1:31: the goodness that God declared at the beginning is the goodness He will restore and surpass at the end, in a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells and in which the redeemed, in their glorified bodies, will dwell with God forever.

Philippians 3:20–21 draws the resurrection hope into the most personal and concrete form: “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself” (NASB 1995). The body of our “humble state”, the Greek *tapeinosis* (ταπεινῳς) connotes the lowliness, the frailty, the mortality of the present bodily existence, will be conformed to the body of Christ’s glory. Not replaced. Not discarded. Transformed. The continuity between the present body and the resurrection body is as important as the contrast, because the resurrection hope is not the creation of a new person from scratch but the transformation of the existing person, the same person, the same body, but raised, glorified, and freed from every limitation that sin and mortality have imposed. The Christ who transforms the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory is doing for each believer what the Spirit did for Christ on Easter morning: not creating something new out of nothing, but raising what was dead into a life that no death can touch again.

VI. Ethical and Eschatological Implications: Living in a Very Good Body

Because the Body Is Good, How We Treat It Matters Eternally

The doctrine of the goodness of creation, the Incarnation, and the resurrection of the body does not float free of practical application; it lands with considerable force in the domains of personal ethics, pastoral care, and cultural engagement. The affirmation that the body is very good, created by God, inhabited by the Spirit, destined for resurrection, transforms the way the Christian must think about sexual ethics, bodily stewardship, the dignity of the disabled, and the care of the dying. Each of these domains is a place where the very good verdict of Genesis 1:31 and the eschatological hope of 1 Corinthians 15 must be brought to bear with theological precision and pastoral compassion.

Sexual ethics: The Pauline argument of 1 Corinthians 6:12–20 grounds the ethic of sexual purity explicitly in the doctrine of the body’s goodness and its destiny. Because the body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, because it is the

instrument through which the believer glorifies God, and because it is destined for resurrection and therefore for a permanent, glorified existence in the presence of the Lord, sexual immorality is not merely a violation of a social norm or a personal boundary; it is a desecration of the temple, a misuse of the instrument, and a contradiction of the eschatological hope. The body matters too much, is too good, too sacred, too permanently significant, to be used in ways that deny its goodness and dignity. The church that holds the very good verdict and the resurrection hope with conviction will preach sexual ethics not as a set of arbitrary prohibitions but as the positive vision of what the body is for and what it is becoming.

Bodily stewardship, the dignity of the disabled, and the care of the dying are equally grounded in the doctrine of the body's goodness and eschatological destiny. Because every human body, regardless of its present condition, is a creature of the very good creation and is destined either for resurrection or for the just judgment of God, it carries a dignity that cannot be stripped away by disability, disease, aging, or the approach of death. The church that holds this conviction will refuse the therapeutic culture's tendency to measure the worth of a life by its productive capacity or experiential quality, and will instead care for the disabled with the honor due to image-bearers whose bodies will one day be conformed to the body of Christ's glory, and will accompany the dying with the confidence of those who know that the groaning of the present body is not the final word about its destiny. The eschatological hope does not diminish the urgency of the present body's care; it magnifies it, because it reveals what the present body is being prepared for. The new heavens and the new earth, not the dissolution of the material creation but its renovation and glorification by the power of the Spirit, are the horizon against which the very good verdict of Genesis 1:31 is to be read and the hope toward which the doctrine of the goodness of creation is ultimately pointing. "And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4, NASB 1995). This is the destination of the very good creation, not its annihilation but its completion, not its negation but its glorification, in a new creation that surpasses the first as the resurrection body surpasses the mortal one.

"It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body; it is sown in dishonor, 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."

1 Corinthians 15:42–44, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Gnosticism	A diverse family of religious and philosophical movements flourishing in the first through fourth centuries AD (and recurring throughout Western history), united by the conviction that material existence is inferior, corrupt, or hostile to the spiritual life, and that salvation consists in the liberation of a divine spiritual essence (pneuma or spark) from its material prison through esoteric knowledge (gnosis). Gnostic Christology was typically docetic, Christ only appeared to have a body, and Gnostic soteriology aimed at the soul's escape from matter rather than its redemption. The patristic church condemned Gnosticism as incompatible with the biblical affirmation of the goodness of creation, the reality of the Incarnation, and the hope of the resurrection of the body.
Docetism	From the Greek <i>dokein</i> (δοκεῖν), "to seem" or "to appear." The heretical Christological position, closely associated with Gnosticism, that Jesus Christ only appeared to have a physical body and only appeared to suffer and die, that the divine Son of God could not truly have become material flesh. Docetism was addressed directly by the Apostle John (1 John 4:2: "every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God") and condemned by the early church councils. It represents the Gnostic contempt for matter applied to Christology, and its refutation is inseparable from the affirmation of the goodness of the created order.
Materialism (Philosophical)	The metaphysical position that the physical world is the only reality, and that everything that exists, including consciousness, mental states, and what is traditionally called the soul, is either identical to or entirely explicable in terms of physical processes. Applied to anthropology, materialism denies the existence of an immaterial soul distinct from the body and holds that human identity is exhaustively constituted by the physical organism. Philosophical materialism is incompatible with the biblical doctrine of the intermediate state, the resurrection of the body, and the creation of the soul by God.
Incarnation	The eternal Son of God becoming human, taking on real, physical, material human flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary, being born as the man Jesus of Nazareth, and living a genuinely human life in an genuine human body. The Incarnation is the supreme affirmation of the goodness of the material creation: the Creator enters His creation as a creature, and the eternal Son permanently retains His human nature, body and soul, after His resurrection, ascension, and glorification. The Chalcedonian definition (451 AD) affirms that Christ is one person in two natures, truly divine and truly human, without confusion, change, division, or separation.
Resurrection of the Body	The eschatological event, described primarily in 1 Corinthians 15 and Philippians 3:20–21, in which the souls of the dead are reunited with their bodies in a glorified, imperishable, powerful, and spiritual form conformable to the resurrection body of Jesus Christ. The resurrection of the body is the Christian hope, standing against both the Gnostic hope (liberation of the soul from the body) and the materialist despair (the dissolution of the self at physical death). It affirms that human identity is permanently and irreducibly embodied, and that

	the redemption of the person requires the redemption of the body as well as the soul.
Intermediate State	The condition of the soul between physical death and the resurrection of the body. Scripture teaches that the souls of believers are immediately upon death in conscious fellowship with Christ (Luke 23:43; Philippians 1:23; 2 Corinthians 5:8), while the souls of the unrighteous await judgment in conscious torment (Luke 16:22–23). The intermediate state is a temporary condition, not the final state; the final state for both the redeemed and the condemned involves the resurrection of the body and the final judgment. The intermediate state demonstrates the irreducibility of the immaterial soul: the person who is “absent from the body and at home with the Lord” is the same person who lived in the body.
Spiritual Body (Soma Pneumatikon)	Paul’s term in 1 Corinthians 15:44 for the resurrection body: soma pneumatikon (σῶμα πνευματικόν). The “spiritual body” is not a body that has become spirit or a body that has been replaced by a spiritual substance; it is a genuinely physical body that has been fully transformed and animated by the power of the Holy Spirit, freed from every limitation of mortality, corruption, weakness, and dishonor. It stands in contrast to the “natural body” (soma psychikon, σῶμα ψυχικόν) of the present life, not as the spiritual stands to the physical, but as the Spirit-empowered stands to the merely natural.
New Creation (Eschatological)	The biblical teaching, developed especially in Isaiah 65–66, Romans 8:18–25, and Revelation 21–22, that the consummation of God’s redemptive purposes will include not merely the salvation of human souls but the renewal and transformation of the entire created order, the new heavens and the new earth in which righteousness dwells (2 Peter 3:13) and in which God will dwell with His people forever (Revelation 21:3–4). The new creation is not the annihilation of the material world and its replacement with a purely spiritual realm; it is the transformation and glorification of the present creation by the power of the Spirit, in continuity with the very good creation of Genesis 1 and in fulfillment of the eschatological hope of Romans 8:23.
Recapitulation (Irenaeus)	The theological concept developed by Irenaeus of Lyon against Gnosticism, holding that the Son of God in the Incarnation recapitulated, summed up and reversed, the entire history of Adam and his posterity, living through the human condition from birth to death without sinning, and thereby undoing at every point what Adam had done. Recapitulation theology has a material dimension: because Christ recapitulates human existence as a genuinely embodied person, He redeems not merely the soul but the whole person, body and soul together, and His resurrection in a genuinely physical body is the necessary conclusion of the recapitulation.
Tov Me’od (טוב מאיד)	Hebrew: “very good.” The divine verdict of Genesis 1:31 pronounced on the entirety of the created order after the completion of the sixth day: “God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good.” The word tov (טוב, good) appears seven times in Genesis 1, each time as a divine evaluation of a particular creative act; in Genesis 1:31 the addition of me’od (מאיד, very) elevates the verdict to superlative excellence. Tov me’od establishes the ontological goodness of the material creation, including the human body, as a foundational theological affirmation against every form of Gnostic, Platonic, or materialist reduction.

Practical Application

A. *For the Mind: What Must We Believe?*

We must believe that the material world, including the human body in all its creaturely particularity, is genuinely and ontologically good, not despite its materiality but in and through it. The very good verdict of Genesis 1:31 is not a preliminary assessment made before the Maker had a chance to evaluate His work more carefully; it is the informed, comprehensive, and permanent evaluation of the Creator who knows exactly what He has made and pronounces it exactly as it should be. The church that believes this will not be tempted either by the Gnostic disparagement of the body or by the materialist reduction of the person to the body; it will hold both the body and the soul in the dignity that the Creator has conferred upon them and will await the resurrection that will restore and surpass that dignity in the power of the Spirit.

We must also believe that the Incarnation and the Resurrection are not merely historical events with soteriological significance; they are the supreme theological affirmations of the goodness of the material creation. The Son of God who became flesh and who retains that flesh in glory forever has placed the divine seal upon the very good verdict of Genesis 1:31 in the most permanent and most personal way possible. And the resurrection of Christ's body, which is the first fruits of the resurrection of all who are in Him, is the promise that the body each believer inhabits now, however frail and mortal and subject to suffering and death, is the body that will one day be conformed to the body of Christ's glory. This is what the body is for. This is where it is going. And this is why it matters how we treat it in the present.

B. *For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?*

Let the groaning of Romans 8:23 shape the way you inhabit your own body in the present moment. Paul does not call the Christian to deny bodily suffering, to pretend that finitude and mortality are not real, or to adopt a stoic equanimity that rises above the pain of creaturely existence by detaching from it. He calls the Christian to groan, to feel the ache of the not-yet, the weight of the present body's frailty and limitation, the longing for the redemption that has been promised but not yet completed, and to let that groaning be an expression of hope rather than despair. The groaning creature who eagerly awaits the redemption of the body is not a pessimist about the present; she is a realist about the present who is filled with hope about the future. The very good creation that God has made and that sin has corrupted is the creation that the Spirit is already renewing and that the resurrection will glorify, and the Christian who knows this can groan with honest acknowledgment of the present and confident expectation of the future simultaneously.

Desire the kind of bodily stewardship that flows from the knowledge that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit and is destined for resurrection. This is not the anxious health-consciousness of the therapeutic culture, which tends the body as an end in itself and measures its worth by its capacity to provide pleasurable experiences. It is the joyful, purposeful stewardship of a creature who knows that the body it inhabits has been purchased by the blood of Christ, inhabited by the Spirit of God, and appointed to display the glory of God in the world until the day it is raised imperishable in the power of the resurrection. Glorify God in your body, not because the body is the only thing that matters, but because it matters more than the Gnostic tradition has allowed and because what you do with it is a statement about what you believe it is worth.

C. *For the Hands: What Must We Do?*

- Read 1 Corinthians 15 in its entirety in a single sitting. Attend to Paul's argument as a theological whole: the historical foundation of the resurrection (vv. 1–11), the logical consequences of denying the resurrection (vv. 12–19), the eschatological framework of Christ as the first fruits (vv. 20–28), the Adamic typology (vv. 44–49), and the doxological conclusion (vv. 50–58). Ask yourself: does this chapter change the way you think about your own body? Does it change the horizon of your hope? Does it produce in you the specific quality

of Christian confidence that Paul describes in verse 58: “Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord”?

- Evaluate your own implicit anthropology for Gnostic residue. The question is not whether you consciously believe that matter is evil or that the soul must escape from the body; it is whether the practical assumptions of your daily life, the way you pray, the way you think about death and heaven, the way you relate to your own body and the bodies of others, reflect a biblical theology of embodiment or a Gnostic theology in thin Christian disguise. Common symptoms of functional Gnosticism in Christian practice include: treating prayer as a primarily mental activity disconnected from the body; imagining heaven as a disembodied spiritual realm rather than an embodied new creation; treating the body’s needs and experiences as distractions from the spiritual life rather than dimensions of it; and discussing death primarily as the soul’s release from the body rather than as the temporary rupture of a unity that the resurrection will restore.
- **Read N. T. Wright’s *Surprised by Hope* (2008).** Wright’s account of the biblical hope for the resurrection of the body and the renewal of the created order is the most accessible and theologically rigorous popular treatment of these themes in recent evangelical literature. His sustained critique of the popular Gnostic understanding of heaven and his positive presentation of the New Testament’s eschatological vision, new creation, resurrection, the transformation of the material world, is essential reading for any pastor or teacher who wants to form the eschatological imagination of a congregation. For a more technical treatment, engage Anthony Hoekema’s *The Bible and the Future* (1979), which provides the most comprehensive Reformed systematic account of eschatology including the resurrection of the body and the new creation.
- Identify one specific way in which the doctrine of the goodness of the body should change your pastoral practice this week. It may be the way you counsel a member of your congregation who is struggling with chronic illness or disability, bringing the eschatological hope of the resurrection to bear on a situation that feels permanently defined by the body’s limitations. It may be the way you address sexual ethics in your preaching or counseling, grounding the ethic of bodily purity in the positive theological vision of 1 Corinthians 6:19–20 rather than merely in prohibition. It may be the way you speak about death and funerals, replacing the popular Gnostic comfort of “she is free from her body now” with the biblical comfort of the resurrection: the body laid in the ground will be raised imperishable.
- Pray for one person in your congregation or community who is experiencing significant bodily suffering: chronic illness, disability, terminal diagnosis, or the frailty of advanced age. Pray for them specifically in light of the theological convictions of this lesson: that their body, however compromised its present condition, is the body that God declared very good, that the Spirit of God dwells in it as in a temple, and that it is destined, if they are in Christ, to be raised and conformed to the body of Christ’s glory. Pray that they would know and feel the weight and comfort of this hope in their present suffering, and that the church would come alongside them with the kind of embodied, physical, practical care that honors the dignity of the body it serves.

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- What has been your operative theology of the body, not the theology you would articulate in a doctrinal statement, but the theology that actually governs the way you think about your own body, about death and what follows it, and about the relationship between your bodily life and your spiritual life? Before proceeding through this lesson, locate yourself on the spectrum between Gnostic body-contempt and materialist body-idolatry. Has the lesson moved you from the position where you began?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read Genesis 1:1–31 with specific attention to the repeated use of “good” (tov) and its final occurrence as “very good” (tov me’od) in verse 31. What is the object of the divine evaluation in each occurrence? What does the comprehensive scope of the final verdict, “God saw all that He had made”, imply about the goodness of the material creation in its entirety, including the human body? What is the theological function of the Sabbath rest in Genesis 2:1–3 as the liturgical seal on this verdict?
- Read 1 Corinthians 6:12–20. What is the specific ethical argument Paul is making in this passage, and what theological grounds does he give for it? How does the designation of the body as “a temple of the Holy Spirit” (v. 19) function in the argument? What is the force of the command “glorify God in your body” (v. 20), and what specific behaviors does it address in the context of the passage? How does this passage relate to the doctrine of the goodness of the body established in Genesis 1:31?
- Read 1 Corinthians 15:35–49 carefully. What question does Paul address in verse 35, and how does he structure his answer? What do the four contrasting pairs of verses 42–44 (perishable/imperishable, dishonor/glory, weakness/power, natural/spiritual) tell us about the relationship between the present body and the resurrection body? Is the resurrection body the same body as the present body, or a different one? What does the analogy of the seed in verses 36–38 suggest about the relationship of continuity and transformation?
- Read Romans 8:18–25. What is the scope of the groaning described in verses 22–23, and who is groaning? What does the phrase “redemption of our body” (v. 23) imply about the relationship between the Christian hope and the physical body? How does Paul’s description of the Christian’s hope in this passage differ from both the Gnostic hope of bodily escape and the materialist expectation of physical dissolution?
- Read John 1:14 and 1 John 4:1–3. What does John’s affirmation that “the Word became flesh” (1:14) imply about the goodness of material existence? What does 1 John 4:2–3 identify as the test of the spirits, and what does this suggest about the theological stakes of the Gnostic/docetic denial of Christ’s genuine embodiment? How does the permanence of the Incarnation, the fact that the risen, ascended Christ retains His human body in glory, reinforce the very good verdict of Genesis 1:31?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson identifies both Gnosticism and materialism as errors that the doctrine of the goodness of creation addresses. Which error do you think poses the greater threat to the contemporary church: the Gnostic tendency to despise the body and locate the true self in a purely spiritual essence, or the materialist tendency to reduce the self to the body and deny the existence of an immaterial soul? Are both errors present in the contemporary church, and if so, in what specific forms do they appear?
- The lesson argues that popular Christian assumptions about heaven, a disembodied spiritual realm in which souls float free of bodily existence forever, reflect Gnostic rather than biblical anthropology. Do you agree with this characterization? How widespread is this Gnostic version of the Christian hope in the congregations you know? What specific biblical texts, rightly understood, most effectively correct it? How would you preach or teach the resurrection hope in a way that addresses this Gnostic distortion without being perceived as unspiritual?

- The lesson treats contemporary gender ideology as a hybrid of Gnostic and materialist errors, materialist in its reduction of biological sex to morally neutral physical substrate, and Gnostic in its elevation of psychological gender identity over the physical body. Is this analysis theologically accurate? How does the doctrine of the very good creation, specifically the goodness and theological significance of the sexed body, address the anthropological errors embedded in gender ideology? What specific theological affirmations would constitute a biblically faithful response?
- Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:44 describes the resurrection body as a “spiritual body” (*soma pneumatikon*). How should this phrase be understood? Is the resurrection body physical or spiritual? How does the parallel with Christ’s resurrection body, which could be touched, ate fish, and ascended visibly into heaven, inform the interpretation of *soma pneumatikon*? What is the significance of the continuity between the present body and the resurrection body for the doctrine of personal identity after death?
- The lesson argues that the doctrine of the immaterial soul is not a concession to Gnosticism but the precondition for a properly Christian eschatology of the resurrection. Develop this argument. How does the affirmation of the intermediate state, the conscious personal existence of the soul between death and resurrection, both presuppose the immaterial soul and guard against reducing the Christian hope to either immediate resurrection at death (which would collapse the distinction between death and resurrection day) or soul sleep (which would deny the conscious personal existence that Philippians 1:23 and Luke 23:43 affirm)?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- Paul’s command “glorify God in your body” (1 Corinthians 6:20) grounds sexual ethics, but also implies a broader vision of bodily stewardship as an act of worship. What specific domains of your own bodily life does this command address beyond the sexual? Consider: the care of your physical health, your patterns of sleep and rest, your relationship with food and drink, your use of physical labor and physical leisure. How does the theological vision of 1 Corinthians 6:19–20, the body as temple, destined for resurrection, reshape the way you approach these ordinary bodily matters?
- The lesson identifies the care of the dying as one of the domains in which the doctrine of the goodness of the body and the hope of the resurrection must be applied with theological precision and pastoral compassion. How does the church you serve approach the care of the dying? Is the eschatological hope of the resurrection, that the body being laid to rest will be raised imperishable, a living reality in the pastoral care and funeral practices of the congregation, or is it a doctrinal affirmation that rarely makes contact with the actual experience of grief and loss? What specific changes in pastoral practice would bring the resurrection hope more concretely into the ministry to the dying and the bereaved?
- The lesson describes the new heavens and the new earth as the transformation and glorification of the material creation rather than its annihilation and replacement with a purely spiritual realm. How does this eschatological vision affect the way you think about the cultural mandate, the human calling to develop the potential of creation, to build culture, to exercise stewardship over the created order? If the material creation will be renewed and glorified rather than discarded, what does that imply about the significance of the cultural work done in the present? Does this eschatological vision change the way you understand the relationship between Christian faithfulness in the present and the final state of all things?
- The lesson addresses the dignity of the disabled specifically as a domain where the doctrine of the goodness of the body demands a counter-cultural pastoral and ethical response. How does your congregation serve those with significant physical or cognitive disabilities? Does the congregation’s practice reflect the theological conviction that every human body, regardless of its present condition or capacity, bears the dignity of the very good creation and is destined for resurrection? What specific barriers, architectural, cultural, attitudinal, prevent the congregation from embodying this conviction more fully?
- The lesson closes with the vision of the new heavens and the new earth as the destination of the very good creation. Take time this week to read Revelation 21:1–22:5 slowly and meditatively as an exercise in

eschatological imagination, allowing the specificity of the vision (the city with its foundations and gates and walls, the river of the water of life, the tree of life, the nations bringing their glory into the city) to correct any Gnostic assumptions you may have about what the Christian hope actually involves. Ask yourself: is this the heaven I have been anticipating? Is this the hope that shapes the way I live in the present? And if not, what theological formation would be required to make it so?

Prayer Focus

Open this fifth lesson of the Anthropology series with a reading of Psalm 139:13–16, which was introduced in Lesson 3 as a text grounding the sanctity of each individual human life in the personal creative involvement of God. Read it again now, in the light of the doctrinal content of this lesson, with attention to its specific affirmations about the body: the woven inward parts, the careful formation in the womb, the eyes that see the unformed substance, the days ordained before one of them came to be. These are not metaphors for a spiritual process; they are the Psalmist’s astonished acknowledgment of the divine attention given to the specific, material, bodily constitution of each human being from the earliest moment of physical existence. Read the Psalm as an act of grateful wonder at the very good body that God has given you, not despite its finitude and frailty, but in and through them, and as a prayer of anticipation for the body that the resurrection will give you in its place.

Spend time in Trinitarian adoration, allowing the doctrine of the goodness of creation, the Incarnation, and the resurrection to deepen your worship of each person of the Trinity. Begin with the Father, the Creator who surveyed all that He had made and pronounced it very good, the God who has not retracted that verdict in the face of the fall’s corruption but has determined, in the sovereign freedom of His grace, to restore and surpass it in the new creation. Move to the Son, who said yes to the very good creation by becoming part of it, who took on the dust He had formed and the breath He had imparted and wore them as His own for thirty-three years and continues to wear them in glory at the right hand of the Father, as the permanent pledge that the material creation has a future and not merely a past. Conclude with the Spirit, who is the first fruits of the resurrection, the down payment of the glory that is coming, who dwells in the body of every believer as in a temple, who produces the groaning of Romans 8:23 that is itself an expression of hope, and who will one day raise the mortal body to imperishable life as He raised Jesus on the first day of the week.

Pray together for the bodily life of the congregation in three specific directions. First, for theological clarity about the body: that every member of the community would hold, with increasing conviction and decreasing confusion, the biblical vision of the body as very good, as the temple of the Holy Spirit, and as destined for resurrection, and that this vision would displace both the Gnostic depreciation and the materialist reduction of the body that the surrounding culture consistently offers as alternatives. Second, for faithful bodily stewardship: that the knowledge of what the body is, created, inhabited, and destined, would produce in every believer the specific quality of care for the body that glorifying God in the body requires: sexual purity, temperance, rest, and the kind of physical engagement with the world and with one another that embodies the love of God in tangible, creaturely, material form. Third, for eschatological hope in the face of suffering: that those in the congregation who are currently experiencing significant bodily suffering, chronic illness, disability, the approach of death, would know, with a knowledge that descends below the intellectual level and reaches the place where suffering actually lives, that their groaning is the groaning of those who have the first fruits of the Spirit and who are therefore awaiting, with confident expectation, the redemption of the body that the resurrection of Jesus has secured and the Spirit of God has sealed.

“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”

Romans 8:18, NASB 1995

Key Texts: *Genesis 1:31; 2:7; John 1:14; 1 Corinthians 6:19–20; 15:35–58; Romans 8:18–25; Philippians 3:20–21; Revelation 21:1–5*

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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