

Key Bible Doctrines

Part 5: Sanctification / The Perseverance of the Saints / Death / The Resurrection of the Dead

Sanctification

Sanctification is a progressive work of God and man that makes us more and more like Christ in our lives.

So far we have considered the work of God in bringing people to a saving faith in Christ Jesus. Sanctification is a continuation of this work of God in which he helps us to achieve an ever increasing degree of holiness and faith in our lives before we are finally made perfect at our glorification. It may be helpful at this point to highlight the differences between justification and sanctification as shown below.

That Differences Between Justification and Sanctification

| Justification | Sanctification |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Legal standing | Internal condition |
| Once for all time | Continuous throughout life |
| Entirely God's work | We cooperate |
| Perfect in this life | Not perfect in this life |
| The same in all Christians | Greater in some than in others |

The initial moral change that occurs at conversion is the first stage of sanctification: “He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5). But it is clear from the New Testament that sanctification is also an ongoing process. While Paul says that Christians have been “set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness” (Romans 6:18) and that they are “dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 6:11), he nonetheless recognises that sin remains in our lives, so he tells us not to let it reign over us and not to yield to it (Romans 6:12-14). Our task as Christians is to grow more and more in sanctification, just as we previously grew more and more in sin: “Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and ever increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness” (Romans 6:19). In this way we are “being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Sanctification is the process of “growing up” in Christ. At conversion we are “born again” spiritually, and as we walk closely with God we continue to grow in our faith until, at last, we will be made perfect like Christ¹ (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:1-3; Ephesians 4:11-13; 1 Peter 2:2). Jesus said, “A student is not above his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher” (Luke 6:40). The apostle Peter encouraged the believers to “make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love” (2 Peter 1:5-7). Paul commended the believers in

¹ Some people argue that it is possible to be perfect in this lifetime based on scriptures such as Matthew 5:48, 2 Corinthians 7:1 and 1 John 3:9. However, there are other scriptures which contradict this view (e.g., Ecclesiastes 7:20; Matthew 6:11-12; Philippians 2:12-13; 1 John 1:8), and it is better to understand perfect holiness as the standard set by Christ to which his followers should aspire.

Thessalonica for their growing faith and love for one another (2 Thessalonians 1:3; cf. John 13:35), and in regard to himself he said, “one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:13-14).

In accordance with the doctrine of God’s providence we can say, on the one hand, that the degree to which a person is sanctified during his or her life is entirely in God’s hands. Thus, Paul prayed for the believers in Thessalonica, “May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it” (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24; cf. Hebrews 13:20-21). But, on the other hand, it is also a work of our own free will as evident from the scriptures quoted above. Thus, Paul encouraged the believers in Philippi to “continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Philippians 2:12-13). Again, Paul urged the Christians in Rome to “offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Romans 12:1-2). Indeed, much of the New Testament is filled with passages like these instructing believers in the various churches on how they should grow in likeness to Christ. Therefore, it is appropriate for us to “offer [ourselves] to God, as those who have been brought from death to life” (Romans 6:13), while at the same time making “every effort ... to be holy” (Hebrews 12:14; cf. 2 Corinthians 7:1).

As part of the process of sanctification, God will often allow his children to experience various trials and tests of their faith. Jesus warned his disciples that, “No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also” (John 15:20; cf. Matthew 5:10-12). Paul spoke of trials that “we were destined for” (1 Thessalonians 3:3) while James encouraged the believers to “Consider it pure joy ... whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:2-4). Peter said that because of the hope we have in Christ we should “greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These had come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed (1 Peter 1:6-7). The writer of Hebrews also encourages us to endure hardship as the discipline of a loving Father (Hebrews 12:5-11), concluding that, “No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it” (v. 11).

The benefits of sanctification in the life of a believer are many. For example:

- It demonstrates our love for God. Jesus said, “Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him” (John 14:21).
- It helps us to keep a clear conscience before God. Paul urged Timothy to “fight the good fight, holding on to faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith” (1 Timothy 1:18-19). Peter encouraged the believers to keep “a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander” (1 Peter 3:16).
- It can lead to believers becoming “an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work” (2 Timothy 2:21).
- It can lead to unbelievers coming to Christ through observing our lives (1 Peter 3:1-2, 15-16).
- It leads to blessings in this life including long life and answers to prayer (1 Peter 3:9-

12).

- It helps us to avoid God’s correction in our lives: “The fear of the Lord – that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding” (Job 28:28; see also Psalm 33:18; 86:11; Acts 5:1-11; Philippians 2:12-13; 1 Peter 1:17).
- It leads to greater heavenly reward (Matthew 6:19-21; 24:45-51; Luke 19:11-27; 1 Corinthians 3:8-15; 2 Corinthians 5:9-10).
- It leads to a deeper walk with God (Psalm 66:18-19; Isaiah 59:2; Matthew 5:8; John 14:21; 1 John 1:6; 3:21-22).
- It leads to the glorification of God (1 Corinthians 10:31; 2 Corinthians 4:15; Philippians 1:9-11; 2:5-11; 1 Peter 4:14; Jude 24-25).
- It leads to peace and joy (Psalm 16:8-11; 19:7-11; Isaiah 61:1-3; Romans 14:17-18; Galatians 5:22-23; Philippians 4:8-9).

It seems fitting to conclude this discussion on sanctification with the words of the prophet David who understood the heart of God even before Christ had come into the world:

Who may ascend the hill of the Lord?
Who may stand in his holy place?
He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
Who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false.
He will receive blessing from the Lord and vindication from God his Saviour.
Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek your face, O God of Jacob (Psalm 24:3-6).

The Perseverance of the Saints

The perseverance of the saints means that all those who are truly born again will be kept by God’s power, and will persevere as Christians until the end of their lives.

This doctrine follows logically from the doctrine of election previously discussed, but there is also substantial scriptural evidence to support it. Before considering this evidence, however, there are two aspects to the above definition which need to be drawn out. On the one hand, the definition clearly expresses God’s providential care in bringing the elect safely through to salvation. But conversely, it also shows the need for individual believers to exercise their free will in *choosing* to persevere in their faith to the very end of their lives. This is consistent with other doctrines where God’s providence and man’s free will are seen to coexist, like the opposite sides of a coin, but in some fashion which is beyond human comprehension.

We can say with certainty that everyone who has been truly born again² will never be lost. Jesus said, “this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:39-40). Again, he said, “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no-one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, is greater than all; no-one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand. I and the Father are one” (John 10:27-30 – See also John 3:36; 5:24; 6:47 and 1 John 5:13). Similarly, in Romans 8:1 and 30, Paul speaks of those who have been justified as if they have already been saved. And in Ephesians 1:13-14, Paul says to the believers, “you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you

² As previously discussed, the term “born again” refers to the regeneration of the spirits of those who are being saved, and by implication includes the associated phases of receiving the gospel message, conversion, justification, adoption and sanctification.

were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession – to the praise of his glory." Peter also spoke of the believers as being those "who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Peter 1:5).

Conversely, we can say with equal certainty that those who persevere in their faith are truly born again. For example, in John 8:31-32, Jesus said to the Jews who believed him, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." On another occasion, when talking about the difficulties that his disciples would face in the world, he said, "All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved" (Matthew 18:22). Paul said to the Christians in Colosse, "But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation – if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel" (Colossians 1:22-23). Similarly, the writer of Hebrews explained, "We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first" (Hebrews 3:14). And in the book of Revelation, we read of Jesus' exhortations to the faithful believers to persevere in their faith in times of trial and to hold on to what they have so that they may receive eternal life and honour (vv. 2:7, 11, 17, 25-28; 3:5, 11-12, 21).

There are three passages in the New Testament which have been used by some people to argue that it is possible even for those who have been truly born again to loose their faith and be condemned. These are Hebrews 6:4-6 and 10:26-31, and 2 Peter 2:20-22. However, this teaching is inconsistent with the doctrine of the Providence of God, and also with the words of Jesus and the apostles already quoted (e.g., John 10:27-30; Romans 8:1; 1 Peter 1:5). A better interpretation of these passages can be derived from the parable of the sower in Mark 4:1-20. Here, Jesus compares those who have been saved by receiving his word into their hearts as seed, sown by God, which falls on fertile soil and gives rise to a productive crop. In contrast, false believers are depicted as seed which falls on shallow soil so that they are unable to persevere in their faith, or as seed which falls among thorns, which represent the cares and worries of this world, that choke them so that their faith is unproductive.³ We can conclude from this that "those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age" (Hebrews 6:4), but then fall away are like the plants that were shallow rooted.

A similar message is given the parable of the vine in John 15:1-8. In this parable, Jesus is depicted as a vine which is tended by the Father, and the branches as his followers. Jesus promised that if we remain in him, and his words remain in us, then we will bear much fruit, but "If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned" (v. 6). In this case, the branches that do not bear fruit and are thrown away are like those who "deliberately keep on sinning after [they] have received the knowledge of the truth" (Hebrews 10:26), and who having "escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and overcome, [are] worse of at the end than they were at the beginning" (2 Peter 2:20). See also the parable of the wise and foolish builders (Matthew 7:24-27); the parable of the wedding banquet (Matthew 22:1-14); and the parable of the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1-13).

But as well as those who are shallow rooted or choked by thorns, the New Testament identifies another kind of false believer whom we might call the servants of Satan. Judas, who betrayed Jesus, is an obvious example. Jesus was referring to Judas when he said, "Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is the devil!" (John 6:70). Paul also spoke of "false

³ Unbelievers are depicted as seed that falls on hard ground and is subsequently eaten by birds showing that the Word of God cannot enter their hearts at all, and is quickly snatched away by Satan.

brethren secretly brought in” (Galatians 2:4, NKJV), and of his being in “danger from false brothers” (2 Corinthians 11:26), and of those who “masquerade as servants of righteousness” but are actually the servants of Satan (2 Corinthians 11:15). Similarly, John warns us to be on the alert, because “this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know this is the last hour” (1 John 2:18). This kind of false believer is portrayed in the parable of the wheat and the weeds in Matthew 13. Here, Jesus is depicted as a farmer who has sown good seed in his field, but his enemy, who represents Satan, sneaked in during the night and sowed weeds amongst the wheat.⁴ The weeds represent the false believers (the seed of Satan), and the wheat represents the true believers (the seed of Christ). Rather than risk damaging the wheat, the farmer chooses not to remove the weeds until harvest time, showing that it is God’s will that some false believers remain within the church right up to the day of judgment.⁵

The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints raises two important questions: 1. Is it possible to tell if someone is a false believer? 2. How can we be sure that *we* have been truly born again?

Evidence from the New Testament suggests that it may be very difficult, and often impossible, to tell if someone is a true or false believer. As indicated in the parables just discussed, some of the false believers will not be known until the day of judgment. This is also seen in Jesus’ sobering warning that in the day of judgment, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’” (Matthew 7:21-23). However, Jesus also used the parable of a tree and its fruit in Matthew 7 to show that false believers will reveal themselves by the kind of fruit that they produce: “A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognise them” (vv. 18-20). So while some false believers will reveal themselves by their actions, others will remain hidden among the true believers until the day of judgment.⁶

For believers seeking assurance of their own salvation, the situation is much simpler. Paul challenged the believers in Corinth to put themselves to the test: “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realise that Christ Jesus is in you – unless, of course, you fail the test?” (2 Corinthians 13:5). In the same way, true assurance can come to believers when they examine themselves with a few simple tests. For example, a truly born-again believer should be able to answer the following questions with a confident “yes”:

- *Am I free from major sin in my life?* While all Christians struggle with sin throughout their lives, those who are truly born again will be immediately set free from major sin: “No-one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in him” (1 John 3:9). The major sins from which we have been set free include: “sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness,

⁴ Jesus explains that the “field is the world” (v. 38). However, since the weeds are sown “among the wheat” (v. 25) we should expect that the “sons of the evil one” (v. 39) will also be within the church.

⁵ Note that the farmer, Jesus, is not concerned that the weeds will compete with the wheat for water and nutrients, indicating God’s ability to take care of his own (cf. Philippians 4:19).

⁶ Unless it is clear by their actions that professing Christians are not truly born again, we should take great care to avoid judging them falsely. Jesus said, “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way as you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you” (Matthew 7:1-2).

orgies, and the like” (Galatians 5:19-21; see also Revelation 21:8).

- *Do I trust in Jesus for my salvation?* Salvation through repentance and faith in Christ, without reliance on works, is the true gospel (Mark 1:14-15; Ephesians 2:8-9). While good works are the inevitable result of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives, we should not be fooled into thinking that our salvation is in any way reliant on good works.
- *Do I love the Word of God and read it ever day?* Jesus said, “Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). He also taught that “everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock” (Matthew 7:24-25).
- *Is there evidence of the fruit of the Spirit in my heart?* In Galatians 5:22-23, Paul lists some of the attitudes and character traits that are produced by the Holy Spirit at work in the life of the believer: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” There are others, of course, such as a love of the truth and of righteousness, a desire to do good works in the world, and a concern for the lost (cf. 1 Corinthians 13:6; 2 Thessalonians 2:10; 1 John 3:18).
- *Is there evidence of spiritual growth in my life?* Peter urges us to add to our faith goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, kindness and love “in increasing measure” because this will keep us from “being ineffective and unproductive in [our] knowledge of Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:5-8). He goes on to say that such growth as this will make our “calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (vv. 10-11).

If a believer cannot answer all of these questions with a confident “yes”, then that believer may not be lost yet, but is almost certainly on shaky ground. Jesus was speaking to believers such as this when he said, “Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne” (Revelation 3:19-21).

Death

When the righteous die their souls go immediately into paradise, but when the unrighteous die their souls go immediately into hell.

The Bible teaches that when we die our souls separate from our earthly bodies, with our bodies turning back into the “dust” from which they were made (Genesis 3:19), and our souls going to either heaven or hell to await the day of judgment. In the Old Testament, the abode of the dead is called *Sheol*⁷ (Hebrew), *Hades* (Greek) or *Hell* (Old English). However, the teachings of Christ, particularly the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31, have led to the modern-day understanding of Sheol as being divided into two separate parts which we call *heaven* and *hell*. In the New Testament, heaven is also called *paradise* which literally means “a garden place” showing that it is a place of beauty and tranquillity (Luke 23:43; 2 Corinthians 12:2-4; Revelation 2:7). Hell, on the other hand, is also called “the pit” and “death” (e.g., Isaiah 38:18; cf. Revelation 6:7-8), and for the unrighteous it is a place of torment. The psalmist complains, “You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths. Your wrath lies heavily upon me; you have overwhelmed me with all your waves” (Psalm 88:6-7; cf. Jonah 2:2-3). While those who go to hell suffer torment because of their sins,

⁷ In the NIV, the word *Sheol* is translated as “the grave” (e.g., Psalm 116:3).

those who go to heaven receive rest and comfort (e.g., Luke 16:25).

Isaiah provided a picture of hell when he described the fate of the king of Babylon:

The grave is all astir to meet you at your coming; it rouses the spirits of the departed to greet you – all of those who were leaders in the world; it makes them rise from their thrones – all those who were kings over the nations. They will all respond, they will say to you, “You also have become weak, as we are; you have become like us.” All your pomp has been brought down to the grave, along with the noise of your harps; maggots are spread out beneath you and worms cover you (Isaiah 14:9-11).

This picture reveals a natural continuity between this life and the next. As well as retaining their personalities, the departed spirits are able to communicate with each other and are aware of their situation. There is also a recognition, to some degree, of the status that a person had when they were in the world. A similar picture is given in Ezekiel 32:17-32 where the king of Egypt and other tyrants of the time, along with their armies, who “Because their terror had spread in the land of the living, [now] bear their shame with those who go down to the pit” (v. 25), and “The punishment for their sins [rests] on their bones, though the terror of these warriors had stalked through the land of the living” (v. 27).

Once sinners have been consigned to hell, there is no hope for them: “For the grave cannot praise you, death cannot sing your praise; those who go down to the pit cannot hope for your faithfulness” (Isaiah 38:18). However, the New Testament reveals that death and hell are only temporary. Paul explained that Christ must reign in heaven “until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death” (1 Corinthians 15:25-26). The destruction of death is also revealed in the book of Revelation where we are told that after the judgment, “death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death” (v. 20:14). This “second death” is also the fate of the unrighteous and will result in destruction of both their bodies and their souls: “But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars – their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death” (Revelation 21:8; cf. Matthew 8:28).

The Bible in many places refers to death as “sleep”, and people who have died as having “fallen asleep” (e.g., Psalm 90:5; Daniel 12:2; Matthew 9:24; John 11:11; Acts 7:60; 13:36; 1 Corinthians 15:6; 1 Thessalonians 4:13). This could simply be a metaphorical expression used to indicate that the “first death” is a temporary state in the same way that sleep is a temporary state from which we eventually awaken. On the other hand, there are scriptures which suggest that at least the righteous dead, and perhaps the lesser sinners, are in an actual state of rest (e.g., 1 Samuel 28:15; Isaiah 14:9; Daniel 12:2; Revelation 6:11, NKJV and NASB). Also, when Jesus said in Matthew 9:24, “The girl is not dead but asleep”, and in John 11:11, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up”, there is a sense that he is speaking rather more literally than metaphorically. We might conclude from this that the righteous dead rest peacefully in heaven awaiting their reward, but the unrighteous dead are tormented by their sins until the day of judgment: “But the wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud. ‘There is no peace, ‘says my God, ‘for the wicked.’” (Isaiah 57:20-21).

While death is associated with sorrow and loss, Christians can take comfort in knowing that their Lord and Saviour has passed through death himself and has come out triumphant. When Christians die, they share in the suffering of Christ and also in his victory. John reminds us that “everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith” (1 John 5:4). And Paul taught that “our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all” (2 Corinthians 4:17). Therefore, Paul was able to say, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me”, but “to depart and be with Christ ... is better by far” (Philippians 1:21-23). Christians who suffer the loss of a loved one who is

a Christian can be comforted in knowing that they will be reunited with them in the new age. Therefore, Paul says that Christians should not “grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope” (1 Thessalonians 4:13).⁸ On the other hand, for those we love who have died without having a saving faith in Christ, our sorry is great (cf. Romans 9:1-3), and our only comfort is in knowing that their loss was the Lord’s will. Knowing what awaits the lost should inspire Christians to pray all the more fervently for their salvation while they are still alive and there is still hope.

The Resurrection of the Dead

Everyone who dies will be resurrected from the dead, with the righteous going to eternal life and the wicked to eternal condemnation.

Jesus said, “a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear [my] voice and come out – those who have done good will rise to life, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned” (John 5:28-29). Paul warned a group of Athenians, “In the past God overlooked [people’s] ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:30-31). Similarly, the writer of Hebrews warned, “man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment” (Hebrews 9:27).

The resurrection of the dead involves the reuniting of their souls with their re-formed bodies. For the righteous, this will also include the transformation of their bodies from mortal to immortal, from weak to strong, and from dishonourable to glorious. Paul explained that, in regard to the righteous, “The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body”⁹ (1 Corinthians 15:42-44). He concluded that “just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven” (v. 49). The Scriptures do not tell us what the resurrected bodies of the unrighteous will be like, but it is reasonable to assume that they will be substantially the same as their natural bodies.

Despite the fact that the bodies of the dead will, to varying degrees, have turned back into the dust from which they were made, the Scriptures are clear in teaching that our bodies will be *resurrected* from their original elements and not *re-created* from new ones. Paul said, “if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you” (Romans 8:11). He also reminds us that “our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (Philippians 3:20-21).

Even before Christ came to earth, some of the Old Testament prophets had foreseen the resurrection of the dead. For example, Job proclaimed, “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God” (Job 19:25-26). Isaiah prophesied in regard to the Jews, “But your dead will live; their bodies will rise. You who dwell in the dust, wake up and shout for joy. Your dew is like a dew of the morning; the earth will give birth to her dead” (Isaiah 26:19). Similarly, Ezekiel was given a vision of a valley filled with dry bones which represent the

⁸ In saying this Paul did not mean that we should not grieve at all, but rather that we should not grieve like people who have no hope.

⁹ In the Pauline epistles, the word “spiritual” never means “nonphysical”, but rather, “consistent with the character and activity of the Holy Spirit” (e.g., Romans 1:11; 7:14; 1 Corinthians 2:13, 15; 3:1; Galatians 6:1; Ephesians 5:19).

whole house of Israel (Ezekiel 37:1-14). God instructed Ezekiel, “Prophecy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! This is what the sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord.’” (vv. 4-6). He also proclaimed, “O my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel” (v. 12).

Paul taught that the resurrection of God’s faithful servants will occur at the end of the current age when Christ returns to gather up his remaining servants: “For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord for ever” (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). In the book of Revelation, we are told that this is the “first resurrection”, with a second resurrection occurring after Christ’s thousand-years reign on earth (vv. 20:1-6). We are also told, “Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. ... they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him a thousand years” (v. 6). It is at the second resurrection at the end of the thousand years that the unrighteous will be judged:

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:11-15).

While it is clear from the New Testament that the bodies of the believers will be resurrected immortal and glorious, we do not know exactly what they will look like. Will they look the same as our earthly bodies? Will there still be men and women? Will we retain our ethnicity? What age will we be? When Jesus appeared to the disciples he looked the same as he did when he died. He even had some of the scars of his crucifixion, and ate food with them (Luke 24:36-43). However, this was necessary so that his disciples would recognise him and understand that he had risen from the dead, and that he was not a ghost. It also seems that the souls in Sheol are able to recognise each other even without their bodies (Isaiah 15:9; cf. 1 Samuel 28:11-14). However, we may need to have physical bodies in order to interact with the new creation, so why not keep our existing bodies but in their glorified state? The Scriptures do not provide any information with which to answer these questions, and it is better that we do not speculate naively. Instead, we should content ourselves with the advice of the apostle John: “Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2).

There can be no better conclusion to this discussion on death, resurrection and glorification than to quote the insightful words of the prophet Job:

But man dies and is laid low; he breathes his last and is no more.
As water disappears from the sea or a river bed becomes parched and dry, so
man lies down and does not rise; till the heavens are no more, men will not
awake or be roused from their sleep.
If only you would hide me in the grave and conceal me till your anger has
passed!
If only you would set me a time and then remember me!
If a man dies, will he live again?

All the days of my hard service I will wait for my renewal to come.
You will call and I will answer you; you will long for the creature your hands
have made.
Surely then you will count my steps but not keep track of my sin.
My offenses will be sealed up in a bag; you will cover over my sin (John 14:10-
17).

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Acknowledgments

Bible quotations are from the New International Version, 1984 unless otherwise indicated.
Other versions referred to from time to time are:

Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible, New American Standard Bible, 1977 (NASB).

The Spirit Filled Life Bible, New King James Version, 1991 (NKJV).