

JESUS, THE RESURRECTION, AND DISABILITIES  
IN THE AFTERLIFE

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On March 14th, 2018, theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking died. Hawking was famous both for being a brilliant scientist and for having ALS (Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis) for many decades, surviving far longer than most people with that diagnosis. There were several cartoons drawn, undoubtedly with good intentions, of Hawking getting up out of his wheelchair and walking into heaven. Aside from Hawking being an atheist and having stated in an interview with *The Guardian*,<sup>1</sup> it also says something about how people see physical impairments. Hawking's death was seen as a release from the disability<sup>2</sup> that had long held him back. One cartoonist, Marian Kamensky, reacted against this by drawing some cartoons with Hawking still in his chair, including one where he is being offered wings by an angel and Hawking refusing with "No thanks."<sup>3</sup>

Hawking rejected the idea of an afterlife. But what about people of faith? How do religious people see the afterlife and how does that reflect our understanding of disabilities? Is heaven and/or the resurrection of the dead seen as a salvation from disability? Should Christians see this life as one marred by disabilities while looking to an eschatological future where all traces of disability are removed?

1. Sample, "Stephen Hawking."
2. There are both a difference and an overlap between impairments and disabilities. An impairment refers to the medical diagnosis (e.g., ALS). A disability may emerge from that impairment because of social barriers that limit the flourishing of the individual with the impairment.
3. Kamensky, "Stephen Hawking."

*Raising Questions about Disabilities*

We must be clear about what the Christian concept of the after-life is. N. T. Wright states, “We should recall in particular that the use of the word heaven to denote the ultimate goal of the redeemed, though of course hugely popularized by medieval and subsequent piety, is severely misleading and does not begin to do justice to the Christian hope.”<sup>4</sup> Rather than a disembodied spiritual existence, the Christian hope is the resurrection of the body, something Wright describes as “life after life after death.”<sup>5</sup> It is understandable that some people would prefer a disembodied existence because that would wipe away all of the bodily differences among us. However, that does not seem to be the majority belief of the earliest Christians or the Judaism from which it emerged. Yet, even a belief in a bodily resurrection creates some confusion as to how to look at disabilities.

I once spoke at a Christian campus group at a local university on the problem of suffering. Two of the elements of my talk were my experience as a father of two children on the autism spectrum and my belief in the bodily resurrection of believers. I did not connect those two themes in my talk, but someone from the audience did in a statement after the event. She commented, “Isn’t it great that your children will be healed of their autism at the resurrection?” But is that true? I am also on the autism spectrum, and I value my autistic traits. They are essential to who I am. Does that mean that I will be healed of my autism as well?

That the resurrection would include a healing of disabilities is not unheard of. Thomas Aquinas taught that those who were missing body parts at death would have them replaced at the resurrection.<sup>6</sup> The focus was on physical impairments, and how Aquinas thought developmental impairments would fit with this is unknown.

How we understand disabilities in the afterlife affects how we understand disabilities in this life. Amos Yong observes, “If we expect that the eschatological good news abolishes all disabil-

4. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 168.

5. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 169.

6. Brock and Swinton, eds., *Disability*, 160.

ities, then the gospel for today does so as well. If disabilities are to be purged in the afterlife, then why shouldn't that purging process begin in this one?"<sup>7</sup> Yong reminds us that biblical theology and practical theology are not clearly distinct. The practice of the church, including how we welcome and include people with disabilities, will reflect other aspects of theology.

As a child, I knew a boy who was born without hands. He could do everything we could only quicker. He seemed content with his impairment. I knew an older man at a previous church who was quite badly impaired from a fall from a roof. I suspect he was desperate to be free from his disability. There are people who value their identity as a person with a disability and others that hate their disability. There are those who are born with a disability and those who acquire a disability. How does any of this relate to a theology of the resurrection? As someone trained in biblical studies, I am not comfortable developing a theology based on personal preferences or societal expectations. I would much prefer a biblical foundation. As a Christian, I see in the resurrection of Jesus Christ some direction as to what happens to disabilities in the resurrection of the dead. The goal of this paper is to look at the biblical descriptions of the resurrection, both of Jesus and of the future resurrection, looking specifically for hints of how they affect our views of disabilities.

#### *Resurrection in the Bible*

Before there was a resurrection of Jesus, there was a belief in the bodily resurrection of the people of God. The Hebrew Bible does not say much about this because it does not show much interest in the afterlife in general. Hope was based more on resting in the promised land than anything. But late in the Hebrew Bible, we see the beginnings of a belief in the resurrection. It has been argued that, while Ezek 37 and Isa 26 hint at the resurrection, the only clear description of the resurrection in the Hebrew Bible is Dan 12. For example, Dan 12:2–3 (NIV) says:

7. Yong, *Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 121–22.

Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.

Wright sees this passage as part of the theme of God righting wrongs, redeeming suffering, and restoring the righteous.<sup>8</sup> There is some evidence that this and some later passages understood resurrection in a way similar to Greek concept of *apotheosis*, that is, transformation into an angelic type being in this case.<sup>9</sup> Such an *apotheosis* could suggest achieving a perfect state, thus eliminating all traces of impairments. But this is not necessarily the case. If resurrection is being described as becoming godlike, those who are familiar with the Greek gods would remember that Hephaestus not only was one of the core Olympians but also had a physical disability. Even if we avoid references to the Greek gods, angelic transformation will not rule out some limitations. Daniel 10 describes the lateness of the angel's response due to obstacles in the spiritual realm. Even the angels were not able to do everything they wanted to do.

Before moving to the New Testament, I would like to briefly mention a passage from 2 Maccabees. The passage attempts to get Jews to give up their faith and culture by means of torture. This passage is about one of several brothers who are being tortured (2 Macc 7:10–11, NRSV):

After him, the third was the victim of their sport. When it was demanded, he quickly put out his tongue and courageously stretched forth his hands, and said nobly, "I got these from Heaven, and because of his laws I disdain them, and from him I hope to get them back again."

Like Dan 12, this is in the context of persecution and should be interpreted as God putting things to right.<sup>10</sup> It could be argued that this martyr saw the resurrection as a healing from an ac-

8. Wright, *Resurrection*, 114.

9. Bedard, "Hellenistic Influence," 174.

10. Wright, *Resurrection*, 152.

quired impairment. No matter what Antiochus did to his physical body during this time of torture, it would all be repaired in the resurrection.

While Christianity shares a belief in a bodily resurrection with Judaism and Islam, Christianity is unique in believing that the resurrection has already begun with Jesus Christ. The resurrection of Jesus and the resurrection of believers differ in timing but not in kind. Paul explicitly ties these events together by saying, “But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor 15:20, NIV). Paul ties the resurrection of Jesus and the resurrection of the believer so closely together that to reject one is to reject the other.

#### *The Resurrection of Jesus*

A part of seeing Jesus as the prototype of the future resurrection is to see his resurrection body as the best description of the resurrection of the believer. There are two aspects of Jesus’ resurrection that are relevant to the topic at hand.

The first is that Jesus’ resurrection was a bodily resurrection and not just an exaltation to a spiritual state. This is made clear in Luke’s description of the resurrection (Luke 24:36–43, NIV):

While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. He said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.” When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, “Do you have anything here to eat?” They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence.

It is clear from this passage that Jesus had some sort of physical body and was not just a phantasm or disembodied spirit. But what about Paul’s comparison in 1 Cor 15 between a natural

body and a spiritual body? If the resurrection body is spiritual, does that not suggest that it is less than physical? The word translated “natural” in this passage does not give information about what the pre-resurrection body. The Greek word is *ψυχικός*, which is often translated as “soul.” If the spiritual body is made from spirit, the natural body would be made not out of flesh and blood but out of soul. In the contrast between spiritual and natural, Paul is not describing the material from which the body is made, but the eschatological stage that they belong to. Gordon Fee states, “The transformed body, therefore, is not composed of ‘spirit’; it is a body adapted to the eschatological existence that is under the ultimate domination of the Spirit.”<sup>11</sup> The resurrection body for both Jesus and the believers is not ghostly but is physical and, in some way, are in continuity with the pre-resurrection body.

The second thing we can say about Jesus’ resurrection body is the continuity between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Jesus’ resurrection body kept the scars of crucifixion. John 20:24–27 (NIV) says:

Now Thomas (also known as Didymus, one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So, the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!” But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.” A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”

Why would Jesus continue to have these marks? It is not as if Jesus could not be healed of them. Other people were healed of much more severe injuries. It is more likely that the scars remained because they were significant to the identity of Jesus. The crucifixion was not just an incidental event in the life of

11. Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 786.

Jesus. The death of Jesus on the cross was the key event in his life and ministry. Something would be missing if all traces of the crucifixion were erased in the resurrection. Amos Yong notes:

on the one hand, the marks of impairment point to the tragic element that remains, that hasn't been eliminated altogether, even in the resurrection accounts; on the other hand, the marks are "somehow transvalued" so that they reflect the gloriousness of the spiritual and heavenly body—of the last Adam and, so we can have help, of ourselves.<sup>12</sup>

#### *The Resurrection of the Body and Disabilities*

How does this inform the Christian understanding of the bodily resurrection and its relationship to disabilities? It could be argued that the nail and spear marks in Jesus' body were an acquired impairment. Yong argues, "Jesus entered into the experience of disability fully in his suffering, persecution, and execution at the hands of others."<sup>13</sup> These marks continued into the resurrection, although they did not seem to impede Jesus in his mobility. This is not to say that every injury in this life will be carried over into the resurrection. But there are certain significant injuries that help shape who a person becomes in Christ. Is it possible that the spinal cord injury of someone like Joni Eareckson Tada will be represented in the resurrection, not necessarily that she will still be paralyzed, but that her disability will be echoed in the resurrection?

In the same way, the incarnation of Jesus is in some way a disability, a disability that remains in the resurrection. The Christian belief in the incarnation is quite radical. Instead of a temporary embodiment such as the avatars of other religions, this was a permanent embodying of the divine. God the Son went from being omnipresent to an extremely localized existence. The New Testament even states that the Son did not know the time of his return, something presumably not true in his pre-incarnational

12. Yong, *Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 129–30.

13. Yong, *Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 126.

state. Nancy Eiseland observes, “Here is the resurrected Christ making good on the incarnational proclamation that God would be with us, embodied as we are, incorporating the fullness of human contingency and ordinary life into God.”<sup>14</sup> And yet that disability in no way impedes Jesus in fulfilling his role within the Trinity.

The resurrection of Jesus was not a freeing of the incarnation, and it was not a time for him to be released to his original spiritual state. Rather, the second person of the Trinity precedes the rest of humanity to the next stage of bodily existence. If the incarnation is a disability, then Jesus still has a disability.

Could human impairments also find their way into the resurrection, not as a source of suffering but as a celebration of God’s power? Despite the common assumptions that disabilities will disappear in the resurrection, there may be good reason to believe that they will continue in some way. Not that impairments will be disabling in the way they are in this existence, but rather physical and neurological differences could be represented without any form of exclusion. Disabilities, like every other aspect of our being, will be changed, “in the twinkling of an eye” (1 Cor 15:52, ESV). Disabilities, in their most life-affirming and God-glorifying qualities, may indeed echo into eternity in the form of our resurrection bodies. This is what the resurrection of Jesus seems to imply about the future resurrection.

Richard Mouw reflects upon what it might look like for a person with Down syndrome to experience the resurrection. Drawing from a phrase that speaks of Jesus’ wounds in the hymn, “Crown Him with Many Crowns,” Mouw suggests, “Molly’s Down syndrome-ness will be ‘in beauty glorified,’ much like the wounds of Jesus.”<sup>15</sup> Mouw has brought up an important point in this conversation. What does it mean to be glorified? Some Christians may assume that glorification must include healing (in the sense of curing) and that it must lead to an ideal abled body.

This goes back to the early church, as Candida Moss explains, “the mechanics of the dead are described using the terminology

14. Eiseland, *Disabled God*, 100.

15. Mouw, *Restless Faith*, 85.

of healing and strengthening rather than metaphors of purification and refinement.”<sup>16</sup> If Jesus could carry the marks of the wounds and his incarnation existence into his glorification, then perhaps it is possible for Christians as well.

It could be argued that certain disabilities might be reflected in the resurrection, but impairments that lead to lack of functionality would mar the perfection of Paradise. Moss, looking to the early church demonstrates the problems with this view. Commenting on Irenaeus’s understanding of the resurrection, she states, “The previous inanimate bodies and body parts are put to use: they leap, speak, hear, and arise.”<sup>17</sup> It gets more complicated when it comes to the functionality of specific body parts, such as genitalia. Tertullian went to great lengths to argue why genitalia will not be functional in the resurrection.<sup>18</sup> Moss then concludes, “In modern theological contexts, we might extrapolate from these positive evaluations of nonfunctioning genitalia the claim that bodily ability is not of paramount importance in Christian constructions of divine interest.”<sup>19</sup>

Summer Kinard suggests this option for Christians imagining what the resurrection could look like for people with disabilities by saying, “It may be that in ways we cannot understand, we are both brought into wholeness in the resurrection and also still show signs in our bodies of the limitations that we lived with in this life.”<sup>20</sup> Any discomfort that people may have with being confronted with disabilities in this life does not require an eschatological removal of signs of disability.

### *Conclusion*

Thinking back to my children’s autism. Would they be healed of autism in the resurrection? Perhaps. Or possibly the aspects of autism that bring danger to themselves and to others may be re-

16. Moss, *Divine Bodies*, 74.

17. Moss, *Divine Bodies*, 74.

18. Moss, *Divine Bodies*, 78–80.

19. Moss, *Divine Bodies*, 86.

20. Kinard, *Of Such Is the Kingdom*, 30.

moved, leaving the aspects of autism that are positive and that shape their personalities?

In Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*, the children encounter some aliens that cannot see. Technically not being able to see is an impairment and the children feel sorry for them. But the aliens do not grieve their disability because the rest of their existence more than makes up for what they cannot do. The alien says to the children, "We do not know what things look like, as you say. We know what things are like. It must be a very limiting thing, this seeing."<sup>21</sup> Could this be a picture of the resurrection? Could the resurrection be an existence that echoes disabilities in such a way that there is nothing to grieve?

We are not given much detail about the future eschatological state. But we do read in Rev 21:3–4 (NIV):

Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

There is nothing in this passage that would exclude disabilities echoing into resurrection. In fact, unless Jesus' body is radically transformed from what walked out of the tomb, then there will be such echoes. With Jesus being presented as the prototype of the resurrection body, there seems to be good reasons that the same thing will happen to us.

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21. L'Engle, *A Wrinkle in Time*, 173–74.

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