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Lay Me in God's Good Earth

A CHRISTIAN APPROACH TO DEATH AND BURIAL



InterVarsity Press

ivpress.com

Taken from *Lay Me in God's Good Earth* by Kent Burreson and Beth Hoeltke

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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL

www.ivpress.com.

In Christ the Dead Will Rise

The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the midst of the valley; it was full of bones. And he led me round among them; and behold, there were very many upon the valley, and lo, they were very dry. And he said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord God, you knowest." Again he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord." So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold, a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And I looked, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, slain, that they many live." So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood upon their feet, an exceeding great host.

EZEKIEL 37:1-10 RSV 1977

They lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.” Ezekiel’s prophecy is about the dry, dead bones of the people of Israel, but the promise God gave Ezekiel to proclaim is one of restoration, the resurrection of the house of Israel. Although our book is about death and burial—dead bones—we begin with the promise Christians hold dear, the promise of the resurrection. Christ’s resurrection assures us of our own resurrection. In him, we are made whole and renewed. In Christ the dead will rise!

Jesus Has Conquered Death

The call came in the middle of evening choir rehearsal at my congregation. It was my (Kent) mom. My dad, Allen Bureson, had fallen and suffered severe head trauma and bleeding in his brain. The prognosis was that he would not recover. If we wanted to say our goodbyes, our family would have to drive the six hours from Saint Louis, Missouri, to Cincinnati, Ohio, in the middle of the night. So I rushed home, and my wife, our two daughters, and I drove to Cincinnati, my childhood home, to make the final journey with my dad.

We arrived at the hospital and after the initial hugs and tears, our entire family joined in vigil around my dad. It is one of the most sacred experiences that I have had in my earthly life. Surrounding my father, I led all of us in the rite that commended him, a child of God, into his heavenly Father’s arms. With death pounding on the door of his life and leading the rest of us into life without him, we all needed to hear a word of promise from God.

Reading for all of my family to hear the words of the risen Jesus to Mary Magdalene outside his tomb from John 20,¹ I placed my hand on my dad’s head and said, “Go in peace, Dad. May God the Father, who created you, may God the Son, who redeemed and saved you with his blood, may God the Holy Spirit, who sanctified you in the water of holy baptism, receive you into the company of saints and angels to live in the light of his glory forever.”² It was a reminder of the promise that my dad, baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus,

would share in the Lord's victory over death. "O death, where is your sting? . . . Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:55, 57). Jesus has conquered death and all those who believe in him shall be victors over death as well.

All Christian burials are declarations of victory. The church buries its dead in the sure and complete confidence that God the Father will raise from the dead that body we entrust into the ground. This confidence in the resurrection in the face of death's destructive power is born from the living Word that proclaims Christ has risen from the dead and is the "firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:20). As the prayer at the end of the committal rite in my tradition proclaims, "Receive our thanks for the victory over death and the grave that He won for us. Keep us in everlasting communion with all who wait for Him on earth and with all in heaven who are with Him, for He is the resurrection and the life."³ Christ reigns over the great enemy, death, and so do all who trust in him.

That promise of victory is not empty. It looks empty as we place the cold, lifeless bodies of those we cherish in the ground. Death stings. As we stand around that grave, we taste death in our mouths, we breath it into our nostrils, we touch it with our hands. But "The Strife is o'er, the battle done; NOW is the victor's triumph won."⁴ Christ's victory and the promise of our victory over death are filled with a specific hope: the resurrection of our bodies. It is the promise that God will raise the body we place to rest in the ground. He will raise a dead and decayed body and it will be imperishable. It will never die again. God will clothe it in immortality, in eternal life. Death that no longer holds sway over Jesus will no longer hold sway over our resurrected bodies. This is a mystery. We cannot comprehend it, but it is the hope proclaimed at the grave, embodied in the imperishable and immortal body of the risen Lord Jesus.

In the hope of the victory of the resurrection, the church waits. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:7-9, "As you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day

of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” In fellowship with the risen Lord, we participate in the building of his kingdom. He came to establish God’s rule and reign over all creation: destroying the power of sinful humanity, death, Satan, and hell. At the center of that kingdom stands Jesus’ resurrection.

His victory over death is the animating pulse that enlivens every inch of God’s kingdom, filling the lives of all who are the first fruits of his resurrection. As the angels in Revelation sing, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever” (Revelation 11:15). Into that kingdom the Lord will invite those who have died and whom we place through burial *in the Lord* into the ground.

The Great Renewal Story

“Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” These words are spoken at many funerals. When we place our human bodies back into the ground from which God created them, we confess something about this kingdom that God establishes through his Son Jesus Christ and by his Spirit. We confess that it is a kingdom of the earth and that it is for the creatures that God created from the stuff of the earth. God’s kingdom is one of renewal, restoration, and recreation. God the Creator will renew the creation rent asunder by human rebellion and death’s destruction. The resurrection of our bodies is part of the culmination of God’s re-creative activity.

This story of God’s kingdom expresses itself in the written Word of God in several different ways. Through Israel, God seeks to bear witness to and accomplish the renewing activity of his kingdom. Through the prophet Ezekiel he promises such living renewal to the exiled people of Israel:

I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle

clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. (Ezekiel 36:24-28)

The Lord promises to re-create his people—give them a new heart and a new spirit—and so to demonstrate his kingdom of renewal to all the nations. Ezekiel 36:29-30 goes on to detail that he will re-create the land as well with abundant grain and fruit. The renewal God intends is a complete renewal of his creation.

Jesus, when he appears on the scene in the Gospels, proclaims, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:14-15). And the sign for the coming of God’s kingdom of restoration was at hand in the last prophet, John the Baptizer. As the disciples are coming down the mount following Jesus’ transfiguration, they ask him, “Why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?” That is, why is the coming of God’s kingdom preceded by the coming of Elijah. In the tradition of Ezekiel, Jesus responds by saying that “Elijah does come, and he will *restore all things*” (Matthew 17:10-11, emphasis added). Then he affirms that Elijah has come in the person of John the Baptizer. The one who was promised, the great prophet Elijah, the forerunner who would announce the renewing kingdom of God, has come, Jesus says. Now God’s great kingdom, renewing the creation that humanity polluted and corrupted, is here. God has begun his great renewal project.

It reaches its pinnacle in the resurrection of Jesus. “For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead” (1 Corinthians 15:21). Here is the cornerstone of the restoration of the entire living cosmos that God created. The firstfruits are not just

human creatures, but the entire creation. The kingdom of renewal God planned from the beginning culminates in humanity's resurrection, along with the renewal of the whole creation. All that has been subjected to bondage to evil and death from human rebellion, God will re-create. This is the great story of renewal that God proclaims in Christ Jesus and which he brings to fruition in and through his Son and by his Spirit.

When we place our bodies into the ground at death in natural ways—in ways that respect the honor accorded to our bodies as God created them and that reflect their origins from the earth that belongs to God—we confess this story of God's kingdom. We confess that God created our bodies from the earth. We confess that he is the Creator of all things, even of our lives. We proclaim that his story is one of re-creating all things through the life, death, resurrection, and second coming of his Son in the power of the Spirit. We confess, with Paul, that we await eagerly the redemption of our bodies at the coming of the Lord Jesus.

The kingdom of the Lord and of his Christ is a kingdom of new life. We place our bodies into the ground to await the day of resurrection in the trust and hope that God will restore all things to full life when his Son comes again. What we sow in the ground is perishable. The body is dead and decays. But what God raises is reborn, imperishable, re-created. It is a human body fit for God's kingdom, and all the cosmos gets to take the ride of rebirth to new life with us.

Jesus' Paschal Journey

The journey to rebirth begins and ends in Jesus' paschal journey. His Pascha, or passover, from death to life is the very shape of the journey of all God's children toward his rule and reign. To arrive at the resurrection, you must pass through death. Apart from Christ's death there is no victory over death. As Paul indicates in Romans 5:14, "Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning

was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.” Apart from Christ, physical death only leads to an eternal dying, but for those who make the journey through Christ’s death, life reigns. Paul goes on to say,

For if, because of one man’s trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ. . . . As sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Romans 5:17, 21)

Participation in Jesus’ paschal journey is the way to the kingdom of life and light, the way home.

Every aspect of Jesus’ story participates in this renewing and restoring work of God. Through the incarnation of the Word, God the Father indicates the intention to restore human creatures and their bodies, to make them holy as God intended. Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River is a full-bodied symbolic experience of radical cleansing through death and resurrection. At his transfiguration, Jesus revealed his glorified body along with the nature of the glorified bodies those united to Christ will obtain at his return and the resurrection of all. Through his death and resurrection, Christ restores humanity to the full and complete life that God intended his creatures to have.

The implications are clear in Paul’s letter to the Colossians:

For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him. (Colossians 2:9-13)

At his ascension, he takes the human body that he has glorified to the right hand of God, and those who are baptized into him journey with him in his body into the kingdom. It is a foretaste of the kingdom to come.

At his second coming, God will fulfill all that he has accomplished for his creatures in Jesus. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15,

The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven. (1 Corinthians 15:47-49)

We shall bear his living image and shall live, move, and have our being in him. We will be created anew in the image of the man of heaven when he comes again in glory.

But the implications of Jesus' journey don't end there. Jesus' paschal journey is the way home for the entire cosmos that God created. It is how God renews all creation. His is the journey of everything that has been created and is held together by the Word of God. As Paul recounts in Romans 8,

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now

hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. (Romans 8:18-25)

So, we wait, and the creation groans with us for that final and glorious day when we cross the threshold of death into the new life of the rule and reign of God.

God the Father turned the horrific act of the crucifixion of his Son into the very means by which he would renew his creation. It is an unfathomable act of grace. Christ Jesus' death and resurrection is the journey God has made to restore the created order of all things. When we place the body of a child of God into God's good earth, we do it knowing this is the last stop before the resurrection of all flesh. Then God will reveal the mystery of the journey into Christ's death and resurrection for all.

In Paul's words,

Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. . . . Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:51-52, 57)

By burying our bodies as naturally as possible, we confess the Father who created us, the Son who redeemed us, and the Holy Spirit who will bring our sanctification to completion at the day of Christ's coming. God will raise our bodies, renew them spiritually to new life, and lead us into his eternal home here on earth. Only then will our paschal journey in Jesus' story be at an end.

Our Bodily Resurrection

When we begin to talk about bodily resurrection, we need to turn our attention first to the importance of our body. Throughout this book, the importance of the body arises in many ways. Christians

believe, teach, and confess that their body is a gift of the Creator. We are creatures who our Creator cares for and loves, for we are wonderfully crafted and beautiful in his sight. Since the body is of vital importance to the Creator, then it must be important to us. An entire book could be written on the importance the Creator places on the human body.

With that in mind, we turn to the resurrection promise Jesus provided. Prior to his death, he claimed, “The Son of man, after three days, will rise from the dead.”⁵ In Christ’s crucifixion, the creature has been brought back into relationship with the Creator. Death no longer has dominion over them. Rather, we too will be raised from physical death because Jesus has died and been raised from the dead.

The body dies because of sin. All human beings, including Christians, at some point will recognize and acknowledge this fact. Death is a result of sin, plain and simple. “Death is a power pitted against all life, is in fact the destroyer of life, the breaker of promises, the slayer of love and communion. Death is not to be welcomed with an embrace but resisted and fought against as the final enemy.”⁶ Death will take our loved ones from us, and we too will die, but Jesus will raise our bodies from the dead. This is the gospel message of Scripture. Jesus’ resurrection is not some figment of the Christian’s imagination.

When Jesus first appeared to his apostles after his resurrection, Thomas was not with them. It is at Jesus’ second appearance that Thomas is present, when the apostle places his fingers into Christ’s wounds and his hand into Christ’s spear-wounded side. Jesus’ victory over death is bodily victory. The body Thomas touched was the same but transformed. Christ was appearing in all his glory. Jesus’ transformed body passed through not only a sealed tomb but closed doors. He could appear whenever and wherever he desired. We can only imagine what his body looked like through the accounts of these eyewitnesses, but his body was resurrected.

Because we are justified, brought back into a right relationship with the Creator, we walk in newness of life. We are the same, yet

different. This is of vital importance to the Christian life, and in this newness, we find a new respect for the value of our body. In 1 Corinthians, Paul asks, “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?” (6:15), and “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God?” (6:19). These verses help us to better understand that the care of our bodies, both now and in death, has purpose and value. Embodied in Jesus we see the divine image of the human body. When God the Father said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17), he revealed to us and all creation the Word made flesh, the Logos embodied, the created human body in Jesus’ body.

Jesus’ bodily resurrection promise is for you. “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Romans 6:5).⁷ Once we are able to realize this resurrection promise, the next logical question is what will bodily resurrection look like? Do we know? Yes! In fact, Scripture asks similar questions and then answers them. “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?” (1 Corinthians 15:35).

Scripture highlights four qualities about the resurrected body:

1. It will be changed from perishable to imperishable (1 Corinthians 15:42).
2. It will be glorious (1 Corinthians 15:43).
3. It will be raised in power (1 Corinthians 15:43).
4. It will be a spiritual body (1 Corinthians 15:44).

For those who place their trust and hope in Jesus, the one who has already conquered death, we too will be victorious over death. We will be raised to new life in him. In a sense, we will once again be molded and shaped by the Creator.

This resurrection of the body, as Paul indicates, is a mystery. We have no idea what it will look like or what it will mean to be changed. Yet, Christ’s resurrected body provides us with a pattern for our own

resurrection. Christ in us will fill us and enliven our resurrected bodies. We too will live in glorified bodies. We will bear the image of the man of heaven, Jesus the Christ.

So, the next time you recite the Nicene Creed, focus on these words: "I look forward to the resurrection of the dead." If you speak the Apostles' Creed, pay attention to the statement, "I believe in the resurrection of the body." Together, we confess that God will raise this body of ours in the image of his Son, Jesus. In Romans, Paul writes, "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Romans 6:5). Jesus' resurrected body is the key.

Resurrection Renewal of All Things

When we look to Jesus to understand our bodily resurrection, we must also look to him to see that he not only renews and restores his people, but the entire universe. This renewing, restoring work is a cosmic event. Think of it as if seeing the entire world through a panoramic lens. The whole creation receives his restorative power.

For now,

the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. (Romans 8:19-22)

When we bodily groan, "Come quickly, Lord," we join with the whole creation yearning for his resurrection power to come and renew all things in heaven and on earth. We await his promise of a new heaven and a new earth, the resurrection of all creation.

We also make this same plea when we pray the Lord's Prayer. In the second petition we recite, "Thy kingdom come." Come now, Lord

Jesus, but also come and renew your entire cosmos. Resurrect us. Create new life in us and all creation. Put an end to the death that surrounds us.

So, what does the renewal of all creation look like? Scripture talks about the feast that awaits us, one that includes the finest wines and richest food.⁸ There will be no more pain, no more sorrow, as all these things will have passed away.⁹ We will see and participate with those who have gone before us.

In this resurrected kingdom, we will eat and drink. We will be with those we love and none of it will ever die. Death no longer has dominion over us or creation. We will feast with the Lord for eternity because it all comes from the source of life.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.” (Revelation 21:1-3)

God, in the new creation, not only comes to dwell with us, he makes all things new, restoring his paradise (Genesis 2:8). This is the kingdom of God where our resurrected bodies will dwell on the resurrected, restored, and renewed earth.

At the center of this abundance, we find communion with God in true trinitarian fashion. God’s redeemed creatures will be in perpetual communion with the heavenly Father through his Son, Jesus Christ, and the presence of the Holy Spirit. Through the new creation itself, we will literally participate in the love, grace, and life of God. The life of the Trinity will permeate the entire new creation. When we eat and drink, when we laugh and sing, when we touch and embrace, when we are overwhelmed by the glory of the vistas of the new

creation, when we see and interact with animals and plants of every type that God created without threat or harm, we will share in the life of the God whose word and breath are both life and existence.¹⁰

This is a kingdom, a life, a world, we can get excited about—a creation with the very best of everything God has to offer. For now, as Paul says, “We see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Resurrection renewal of all things, although still a mystery to us in many ways, can be dimly seen in the beauty of creation each day of our lives. We see it in the color of flowers, grass, and sky; in the rainbow after a spring shower; in the dew that sits upon a windowsill on a chilling winter morn or the beauty of falling leaves as summer ends its days. God’s glory will be abundantly clear and on display when he redeems his creation. “All the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD” (Numbers 14:21).

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