

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ: Was it Physical or Spiritual?

Dr. John Ankerberg with Dr. Gary Habermas and Dr. Antony Flew
(Excerpted from the series “Did Jesus Really Rise From the Dead?”)

Dr. John Ankerberg: There are some people, Gary, some ministers in churches, who claim this is not a physical literal resurrection of Jesus from the dead. This is what they call a *spiritual* resurrection from the dead. Why is that false? Why is it not just a spiritual resurrection?

Dr. Gary Habermas: Well, this is the earlier point at which I was at odds with Tony. I would say today, this is a statement that tells you where some scholars are today. I’m currently studying 100 sources on the Resurrection from 1975 to 2000 to see if I can get a feel for where critical scholars are. And by far, most scholars today think something really happened. The disciples had real experiences. They believed they saw the risen Jesus. And most of these scholars think the disciples really saw something; they had real experiences. But the majority of scholars who will even admit that Jesus appeared to them, they shy away from the physical body and they think, I don’t know—these are my words—that maybe there was some kind of a shimmering hologram or something. So that’s probably the typical approach today from skeptics that are somewhere in between the two of us.

Ankerberg: Another thing people usually say is, “Hey, Paul uses the word *spiritual* in 1 Corinthians 15 [v. 44]. Does he mean spiritual in the sense of some ethereal kind of wispy, see-through thing or is this a literal physical body?” What do the words mean there?

Habermas: This is crucial for us because we believe that—and we’ve been playing around here with the Gospels a little bit, but we would both say Paul is by far the best evidence.

Dr. Antony Flew: Right.

Habermas: “He is the only eyewitness”—that is what everybody says today. So what Paul thinks about the Resurrection body is crucial. Now, just a note here concerning 1 Corinthians 15. There’s obviously a Greek word for spirit—*pneuma*. Paul doesn’t choose that word. He says “spiritual [*pneumatikos*] body [*soma*].” So I assume there’s some change going on, but the idea is, there is a physical body there.

Now, to show my earlier comment, I would not think that Paul is saying Jesus appeared as a spirit. If you want, I can give that to you briefly in a Pauline book accepted by all critics: Philippians. By the way, critics almost always accept Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, and Philippians. G. A. Wells, who is probably to the left of Tony, accepts eight of Paul’s writings. He accepts those five and three others.

I think this is crucial to talk about Paul here because everybody admits the Pauline data. Critic after critic claims there is no eyewitness data except for Paul. And so it’s important to know what Paul thinks he saw on the way to Damascus.

Now, I said before in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul could have chosen to only use the word *pneuma*. He doesn’t. He does say “spiritual,” but he’s got an adjective there. He also says, *soma*, “body.” What did Paul mean?

Philippians Chapter 3. It's a short chapter. There are 21 verses, but Paul says three things in one chapter that indicate he's talking about a physical resurrection. In the opening verses he says, "I was a Hebrew of the Hebrews" and "as touching the law," he says, "I was a Pharisee." Now, it's very well known that the Pharisee believed in a bodily resurrection. In fact, according to Acts 23, as Paul was being taken captive by the Romans to prevent his being killed, he shouted out to the group of people and said, "Why are you taking me? Because I believe in the resurrection of the dead?" He meant a literal resurrection.

When the Pharisees heard that, they said there's nothing wrong with this guy. But the Sadducees [who didn't believe in the Resurrection] didn't like it. So as a Pharisee, he's agreeing with the Pharisees.

So, the first evidence is from Philippians 3. As a Pharisee, Paul believes in a physical resurrection.

Secondly, in verse 11 he says, "That I may attain the resurrection of the dead." Now, the normal Greek word for resurrection is *anastasis*, but in this passage, Philippians 3:11, he puts a prefix on there, **ek anastasis**. **Ek anastasis**, according to all Greek scholars that I know of, is translated in this passage: "The out resurrection from among the dead." Paul said, "I want to attain the out resurrection."

Now, to a Jew, "out resurrection" means "what goes down is what comes up." You come out from death. And then just a few verses later, Philippians 3:20,21, he said, "From Heaven, we look for Jesus who will change our vile *soma* (body) to be like unto His glorious *soma* (or body)," when he should have said *pneuma*, according to this other view.

So he's a Pharisee who believes in a physical resurrection. **Ek anastasis**—"resurrection from out among the dead ones."

Thirdly, Paul says, "He [Jesus] will change **my body** to be like **His body**."

So right there in Philippians 3 alone, I think the picture of Jesus being some wispy spirit that appeared to him on the road to Damascus doesn't fit Paul's own data.

Ankerberg: Tony, you are an empiricist. You are dedicated to following the evidence. What do you do with this evidence?

Flew: Well, I find the idea of a spiritual body very peculiar in that, after all, when you say something is spiritual it's rather like saying it's immaterial. You're not—well, if you say it's immaterial, you're not telling us of any characteristic at all that you know of that it has. It seems to me that immaterial substance is really nothing at all. And a spiritual body seems to me not to be a body at all.

Ankerberg: All right, let me ask you a question. If I say the Bible is a spiritual book, does it mean that it's not a material thing?

Flew: No.

Ankerberg: Well, could it be a spiritual body and still be a physical body?

Flew: Well, it might be the body of someone you would say is a spiritual person.

Ankerberg: Now, I assume you're saying that because Paul uses that illustration a couple of chapters back [1 Cor. 3:1-3], when he talks about "fleshly men" and "spiritual men."

Flew: Yes. Yes.

Ankerberg: But in referring to spiritual men there, wasn't he talking to real flesh and blood guys who were walking around?

Flew: Yes, but they're spiritual in the sense of how they behave and what they think about and what they do, aren't they? The spiritual in "spiritual body" is not talking about how the body behaves. It's surely talking about what sort of body it is.

Ankerberg: Gary?

Habermas: He's exactly right. It's an ontological comment, not a behavioral comment. However, I think the issue here is, Tony is looking at the phrase "spiritual body" with 20th century empiricist or analytic eyes, and I think Paul has to describe what he means by spiritual body. And he has already indicated three things from Philippians 3: "I am a Pharisee so I believe in the resurrection of the body." Two, *ek anastasis*, "out from among the dead ones," and three, he calls it "He will change my vile body to be like His."

There it's "glorious body." It's not "spiritual body" in Philippians 3:20,21. It's "glorious body." So now you have body plus something else—I suppose some kind of glory but not less than a body. So maybe the problem is, we're looking at this word "spiritual" with our 20th century eyes.

But I guess here is the issue: If Paul is clear in Philippians 3 that this is not some wispy spirit, then we can't have the problem of saying that this is non-physical because he's telling us what he means by it. I take Philippians 3 to be a bit of a commentary on 1 Corinthians 15.