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S6E7 - Paul's Thoughts on His Conversion and Our Resurrection

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Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

We continue our discussion from the last episode by doing a word study on biblical writing concerning Paul's conversion story and his thoughts on the future resurrection. Did they differ from the teachings of Christianity at the time? Mike Licona guides us through the text on this issues.

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Transcript

Hello and welcome to the Risen Jesus podcast with Dr. Michael O'Kona. Dr. Lacona is Associate Professor in Theology at Houston Baptist University and he is President of Risen Jesus, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. My name is Kurt Jarrus, your host.

Well, he was blinded by the light, and last week we didn't really get to talk too much about that experience from Acts as it's recounted, but we'll be continuing to look at Paul and the experience that he had on the Damascus Road and his interpretation, his beliefs about that experience and guiding us through the data set that we have as we explore the historical bedrock, as we look at the facts about Jesus, is our expert of the program Dr. Michael O'Kona. Mike, good to see you again today. Hey, thanks.

It's good to see you too. It's a good fun topic to discuss. Yeah, you know, on the last episode we just began working our way through, looking at a number of phrases that Paul used to describe the experience, particularly we looked at that word "appearance." And, you know, we didn't even get to the book of Acts, which is where Luke recounts, I think it's in three different spots, Paul's conversion experience.

And the scholars, as you know, are debating over what exactly that experience was like. And as you mentioned, it was different than what the 12 experienced in the Gospels. So why don't you start by guiding us through the three different narrative accounts in Acts about that experience? Sure.

Well, you're right. There are three different accounts. They're in Acts chapter 9, 22, and 26.

The gist of what happens is Paul is on his way to persecute Christians in Damascus. And he and his traveling companions as they're on their way. All of a sudden they're interrupted by a bright light.

A light that Paul says in the book of Acts was shining brighter than midday. And it causes him to fall down to the ground. And he hears a voice out of heaven that says, "Paul, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" And Saul answers, "Well, who are you, Lord?" And he says, "Gee, I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.

Now go, get up, and I will show you the things that you must suffer for my namesake." And in another one, you know, he's not trying to be, Luke is not trying to be exhaustive in reporting every word that was said there. Because later on, in another rendition of that account, he adds that God was sending him to speak to the Gentiles, the preach to the Gentiles. Now, so that's the gist of what's narrated in the book of Acts about Paul's conversion experience.

And well, that's interesting is because again, this would seem to be reflecting more of a heavenly vision outside of space time rather than the kind of experience that we read

about in the Gospels. Now, there are, in these accounts though, there's, yes, there is something different, but there's also a physical aspect of it too. So it doesn't seem like it can merely be a spiritual vision like Peter's dream to, you know, go send the Gospel to the Gentiles there with Cornelius in Acts 10.

There's something more to it. There is a, I'm not sure exactly how you would describe it, a trans-physical interaction that's happening here. And the experience doesn't just affect Paul, right? It's not just Paul by his lonesome self.

The experience also affects the people he's with, isn't it? That's correct. And yeah, that term you use trans-physical, I believe that's the term NT right uses for it. I think it's a decent term.

It's hard, you know, scholars debate even Christians and evangelicals debate over the, even if you think the body of Jesus, the resurrection body had continuity with the body that's buried as most do. You know, was it the same? They had arguments like, well, is it the same atoms and so forth? So it's hard, you know, you're looking at someone who can appear and disappear at will if the Gospels are correct. So how do you describe that? I think trans-physical is a decent term for it.

And you're right. It's, there is some, some physical aspects to this because like you said, there are traveling companions and you know, they hear the voice and they see the light. And I think it's important to note here that although scholars debate over who wrote the book of Acts, they are in agreement that whoever wrote Acts also wrote the Gospel of Luke, like Acts is part two.

It's the sequel. And so now according to Craig Keener in his massive four volume commentary on Acts, I mean the introductory, the pro-legomena content is I think 624 pages of small font. I mean, this guy's really looked at stuff.

You know, Keener is just a machine when it encyclopedia when it comes into stuff. He says the majority of scholars, although they don't name Luke, they do think that Luke was a traveling companion of Paul. So there's only a limited number of people and Keener does think that it's Luke and a lot of other scholars think that it was Luke.

So, but regardless of that, of who the author was, it's the same author who wrote the Gospel as who wrote Acts. And the gospel have Jesus resurrecting bodily, leaving behind an empty tomb and appearing to his disciples in a manner that he eats. He eats food that they had cooked.

So I mean, it's a, and he says that a spirit doesn't have flesh and bone as you see that I have, you know, it's a physical kind of appearance that they can touch as well. But when it comes to Paul's experience in the book of Acts, it's different. And the reason it's different is because it's a post ascension appearance of Jesus to Paul.

Jesus is in his glorified state at that point. So it's gone to the nature. It shouldn't surprise us if it's different.

Right. Right. So there's some physical aspect.

Again, the companions, they hear the voice. But if I recall correctly, maybe from Acts nine, they don't understand it maybe, whereas Paul can hear and understand. And then also they do see the light.

But if I also recall correctly, they're not blinded like Paul is. Right. So there are some differences there.

And some like to point out and see contradictions there because in one, it says, in one instance, it says that the traveling companions heard the voice in another, it says they did not hear the voice. But the same Greek word *Akuo* is used there. But that can mean different things.

So, you know, just as in English, Greek words carried a variety of meanings. And Luke, if I remember writing uses this something like 57, yeah, 57 times to mean listening with an intent to understand. So it could certainly mean, I think what we're most likely seeing here is in one account, Luke is saying that the traveling companions heard the voice.

And then in the other one where it says that they did not hear the voice, it probably has that connotation of understanding behind it. So it's like they heard the voice, they saw the light, but they did not hear the voice. They saw the light, but they did not understand the voice.

I think it's what's going on there. And, you know, if we're talking about different authors, well, then you could say perhaps you could still reconcile it. But through the different meanings of *Akuo*, the Greek word here, understand, if you're talking about the same author, but like ones and acts and the others in the gospel of Luke, you could still do the same thing.

But we're talking about the same author in the same book. It just seems uncharitable to demand that there's a contradiction here. It just seems more likely that he's using a variety of meanings here.

Yeah. And even in English, we have this semantic range where, hey, did you hear the bird? Hey, are you hearing me? Yeah. Are you hearing me to understand what I'm saying? I hear you.

Yeah. We've got the same semantic range that exists in English as it did in Greek. So you're right.

We should just be charitable here. It's a good point. And expect that there's no, there's

no contradiction with the very author in the very same book.

So no problem there. Okay. So is there anything more that needs to be said here about acts and the different narratives of the conversion experience? Yeah.

Another difference that's often pointed out is that in one says the traveling companions fell down to the ground and with Paul and the other says the traveling companions stood there. And I don't see this as a problem either because the Greek word, it is in English, but the Greek that's used there is what's important and it's the word *histamine*. And *histamine* carries the meaning that can mean standing like literally standing, but it often means remaining in a stable position.

You're just in the same position, a fixed position, or it could even mean you're present or you've just stopped *histamine*. A good example of this is in Luke chapter seven where you have a sinful woman who comes in and Luke says that she stood behind Jesus, *histamine*, she stood behind Jesus and she wet his feet with her tears. She wiped his feet with her hair and then she kissed and anointed his feet.

It's hard to do if you're standing up, Mike. Standing behind him. That's that's exactly right.

But if it meant if the term is being used there in a sense that she remained in a steady position behind Jesus, we should imagine that that Jesus is reclining as would have been the case at a dinner. He would have been reclining and she would have been at his feet behind him at his feet doing these honorable deeds to him, these deeds to honor him and sorrow and repentance and begging him to help her. So yeah, otherwise, like you said, it's going to be really you're going to have to be really flexible and being able to contort yourself in a lot of different.

Really long hair too. Really long hair. Really long hair.

Yeah. So it's more likely that when Paul's Luke is in Acts, Referral one occasion, they fell to the ground and the other they were standing there. He's meaning that they were stopped there with Paul and they were you know, it's not talking about in that case, it's not talking about the position they're in.

And I don't see this at all as a stretch or a strain of the text. I mean, this is we're within the normal use of the meaning of the of that Greek term. So we have to make sure that we are reading these texts and giving them their proper due in the original language and what that meant.

And sometimes that's just not so I think the English translation standing is probably not the best one there. But what would you use instead? You know, sometimes there's just no direct perfect translation of another from Greek to English. Yeah, interesting.

All right. So why don't we transition and talk about now Paul's beliefs about the nature of the resurrection. So we've we've gone through now what he said about the appearances and his other terms that he's used for, you know, to appear.

And then we've got Luke, at least what I think is Luke describing the conversion experiences. But what's the data set on Paul's beliefs about the appearance and the the Mascis Road experience? A good question. So we've looked at some ambiguous text, vague text.

Now we're going to look at some that that that yield some insights into what Paul how he viewed resurrection with the nature of resurrection. So the first text we can examine is Romans chapter eight verse 11. And it reads, Now if the spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, the one who raised Jesus from the dead will give life also to your mortal bodies through the dwelling of his spirit in you.

Now, when you take this in total context, you know, just even with the verses that follow, it talks about how all creation is groaning out for its redemption when Jesus returns. And in verse 30, 23, it talks about the redemption of our bodies when Jesus returns. So he's going to give life also to our mortal bodies, the redemption of our body at the general resurrection when he returns.

So he's going to give life to our mortal bodies resurrection, our resurrection is going to be a transformation of our mortal body. And here he says, the one who raised Jesus from the dead will give life also to your mortal body. So if our mortal bodies are going to be resurrected, it all is because Jesus's mortal body was resurrected.

So this verse, to me, it suggests that Jesus is resurrection by implication, Jesus's resurrection was something that occurred to his mortal body to his corpse. Yeah, good. So that's one simple verse, but it seems like there's a whole lot more, isn't there? There is.

And perhaps one of the most interesting, this is probably the most interesting and most discussed text. And that's 1 Corinthians chapter 15 verses 42 through 54 when it comes to the nature, because here Paul, remember in that oral tradition, verses three through eight, Paul doesn't really talk too much, doesn't really give us much about the nature of anything. He's saying what goes down in burial comes up in resurrection.

So it's a, it's a physical resurrection. Although, you know, we can't, only has so much weight to it. It's not that secure, but maybe weekly implied.

But here he's going to talk about resurrection. And he's going to do so in a way similar to how he does in Romans eight, 11. It's not going to, he's not going to talk about Jesus's resurrection directly.

But the nature of it, but he's going to talk about it, the nature of Jesus resurrection

indirectly. Again, it's going to kind of be the way, instead of saying the way Jesus was, well, he does say at one point, the way Jesus was raised is the way we're going to be raised. Like verse 20, he says, Christ is the first fruits of those who sleep.

He's the first to be raised from the dead in a resurrection body. Three verses later, verse 23, he talks about us being raised. He says, but each in his own order, Christ, the first fruits after that, those who belong to Christ at his coming.

So the rest of the general resurrection, the part two of it is going to occur when Jesus returns. That's when we will be raised. Then Paul goes on to describe how we will be raised.

So since in verse 20, he's the first fruits and the we're going to be raised like him at his coming, then if he's going to say, it's like the manner in which we're going to be raised, it's crystal clear that Paul thinks that that is the way Jesus was raised. So now let's look at what Paul says about the way we're going to be raised. He says, he's going to answer two questions in this context.

It's like, how are the dead raised and with what kind of body do they come? So he's going to tackle the second question first. What kind of body? Well, he's going to give a seed analogy. He says, the seed that's buried is not the same kind of thing that is raised from the dead.

The seed is going to split and it's going to change. So then he says, the body that is buried, what is sown, it is sown in corruption. It is raised in incorruption.

In other words, our body, when it's buried, it decays. It's sown in corruption. It will corrupt.

It will decay decomposed, but it's raised in incorruption, undecatable. It is sown in dishonor. You don't want to touch a corpse, right? It will make you unclean according to Jewish law.

It is raised though in glory. It is sown in weakness with all of the mortal fleshly weaknesses that cancer and heart attacks and back pain and whatever, all these weaknesses, it is sown in weakness. It is raised in power.

It is sown a natural body. It is raised a spiritual body. Now it's this last comparison that has brought about legions of academic publications.

What does Paul mean by this? And there are various opinions and you look at different English translations and they say something different. Some scholars like to say that when it's talking about sown, a natural raised a spiritual, it's a better translation to say it is sown a physical body. It is raised a spiritual body.

So if it's raised sewn buried as a physical material body, it will be raised as a spiritual immaterial body. And this is reflected in some English translations like the new revised standard version, the common English Bible, the amplified Bible. I think the new Jerusalem Bible, there are a few of them that have this translation.

So, in my research, what I did was I looked, you got to look at what these two terms mean. And the term here, most translations have natural, not physical, but it still could mean physical. I guess you could say it in a physical sense.

It's sewn in natural bodies, raised a spiritual body, if spiritual means immaterial. The Greek word that's used there translated natural is *sukhikas* from the root *sukhay*, meaning soul, life. It's where we get the study of life or the soul, psychology, *sukhay*, and *laghas*.

So you got *sukhikas*, it's soulish. And it means a number of different things in the ancient literature. It's used several times in the New Testament, I think six times.

And it's always in the negative sense. In fact, James, in the letter of James, he talks about how I think it's the wisdom of this world. He is earthly *sukhikas* and demonic.

So whatever *sukhay* means here, it's not in a good sense. When we look through the ancient literature, and I had an assistant help me with this, we back all the way up to the eighth century BC. That's as far back as you can look in the ancient Greek literature.

And then you have to stop somewhere. So we went to the third century AD. Okay, so it's 11 centuries.

And we found 846 occurrences of the term *sukhikas*, not just *sukhay*, but *sukhikas*. And you want to know how many times it means physical or implies physical zero. It never means that.

So to use that kind of a contrast physical versus non physical material versus immaterial is no longer sustainable. It is not a good translation. That's not what Paul Sam.

Now, what is he saying? We'll get to that in just a moment. The other term is *pumadakas*, which is the Greek term for spiritual, which has the root *puma* spirit. But what does that mean? Well, we looked in the same timeframe, eighth century BC through the third century.

There are 1131 occurrences of the term. As far as I know, no one else has done a word study to this extent with it. So this was ground breaking in our 2010 book, *The Resurrection of Jesus*.

So 1131 occurrences. Now it does have various meanings. It can mean immaterial, ethereal, like, you know, you put your hand through it like a ghost or something.

Okay. But it also means other things like chrisopus. And I think the third century BC uses it in a sense when he's describing the stoics as spiritual persons.

Like I could say, you know, Kurt, Dr. Jarrus is a spiritual person. He's got his mindset on spiritual things. That's his, that that is his priority in life.

Okay. Now what does Paul mean by here? Well, we've got a really good idea when we go just a few chapters earlier in the same letter, because Paul uses the same two terms, suhikkas and pumadakas. In chapter two, verses 14 and 15, let me, let me read those to you.

He says, but the natural man, suhikkas, the natural man does not accept the things of the spirit of God for they are foolishness to him. And he is unable to understand them because they are spiritually pumadakas, spiritually examined, spiritually discerned. So it's kind of like think about it this way.

I remember there when I lived in Virginia Beach, I saw an African-American wearing a t-shirt that said, I forgot what was on the front, but on the back it said, you wouldn't understand. It's a black thing. And so I think you could, you could say with first Corinthians chapter two, verses 14 and 15, we can imagine Paul passing out t-shirts in to the Christians at the church at Corinth and on the front it says, the wisdom of God and on the back it says, you wouldn't understand.

It's a spiritual thing. That's what Paul is doing here. He's contrasting the natural man who can't really even understand the things of the spirit.

And that's why I think this becomes apparent sometimes when we look in our political process today and we say, why is it that so many people just don't get the Christian thing? And they take these views that are so contrary to biblical teaching. They just can't understand because it's a spiritual thing. That's what Paul's saying.

So it has nothing to do with substance. And I think what we're looking at here in first Corinthians 15 when he says it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. He's not talking about the substance.

He is talking about the mode. So our body is buried. It's sown as a natural body that's animated by heart, lungs, kidneys, etc.

But it's going to be raised a spiritually spiritual body. It's empowered and animated by the Holy Spirit. I think that's what is going on here.

So again, it has nothing to do with the substance of our bodies. Now, Paul hasn't given us anything here naturally on yet on what it means. It's not like Romans 8:11.

But he is saying here, he hasn't given us what our bodies are going to look like at this

sense. Or whether it's physical or spiritual. All I'm saying is this text does not support the view that it is an immaterial body.

Yeah. So then there's another thing here. In verse 45, it says, the first Adam became a living soul.

The last Adam, a life-giving spirit. Oh, so what's happening here? So we have two things, two contrasts that are going on between Adam and Jesus. The one, it's living versus life-giving.

And there we got the same word that we found in Romans 8:11, "Zoya Poiado," "Life-making," "Life-giving," okay? And it's a living versus life-giving. And the other one is soul versus spirit. You got Sukkai versus Pnuma.

The same roots as Sukkot and Pyumatikas. So this is really difficult to translate in a in English in a way that is really polished and fluid. But a rough translation, I would give it would be this.

Adam became a natural entity that's living, whereas Jesus became a spiritual entity that's life-giving. And natural again, we see what Paul meant by that versus spiritual. Let's just look at one more thing that I think is important in this text because it is appealed to so often.

And that is verse 50 where Paul says, "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God." And so this is important. Some take that to say, "See, he could have been more clear. Flesh and blood, flesh and blood, our bodies, physical bodies cannot inherit the kingdom of God." So it's not going to be this corpse.

It's going to be a spiritual body, something we get that has no continuity with our present body. But that misses the fact that flesh and blood is almost certainly a figure of speech. It's a linguistic idiom, probably a semitism.

And we have these kind of things in our language like, you know, that guy is green with envy. We don't really mean to say the color green. He's a red-blooded male.

Well, does that mean there's a different colored blood that he has? Or what about he's hot-headed or a cold-blooded murderer? You know, the temperature of the guy's blood is no different. The temperature of his head is no different. These are linguistic idioms we have in English.

Well, flesh and blood appears to be one in Greek. Again, probably a semitism. We find it sometimes it's used in a sense of, you know, physicality.

But in the New Testament, it's not typically used in that way. Let me give you just two examples. We looked at Galatians 1, 16 earlier.

And there it says, "God was pleased to reveal his son to me in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles. I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood." It's referring to humanity there. Humans, mortals.

Yeah, certainly, basically not physical. Right. Paul's not consulting with flesh and blood by speaking to meat and a bowl of blood.

That's right. The other, another occurrence is in Matthew chapter 16 verses 15 through 17. And there, Jesus says, "Well, you know, who are people saying that I am? Oh, some say you're Elijah.

Some say you are the Messiah, etc. Well, and then Jesus is, well, who do you say that I am? And Peter answers, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bargeona, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven." It's contrasting not physical with immaterial, material verses immaterial. It's contrasting divine with mortals.

Humans there. It's flesh and blood is just referring to someone who's human. That's all it is.

So there is nothing in this text in 1 Corinthians 15 that is suggesting that the resurrection, our resurrection and by implication, Jesus' resurrection is one that's immaterial and has no continuity with our present bodies. Yeah, good. Well, thanks for helping us get through some of those difficult passages where it may appear that Paul is talking about some spiritual resurrection and immaterial resurrection.

Certainly, the evidence suggests that Paul means something else here. And on our next episode, we're going to delve even deeper into these passages where Paul does talk about other verses that talk about the resurrection being a physical thing. There's so much to deal with with Paul here.

He's such an important figure in the case for the historical bedrock for Jesus and the resurrection. So thanks for guiding us through that, Mike. Well, if you'd like to learn more about the work in ministry of Dr. Mike Lacona, you can visit RisenJesus.com where you can find authentic answers to genuine questions about the historical reliability of the gospels and the resurrection of Jesus.

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