
The Resurrection and the Rapture

1 Corinthians 15:50-58

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Have you thought about it this week?

Has the resurrection changed your life?

For our study of eschatology, we come to a key "when". When will the resurrection take place?

An Impossible Situation

(v. 50)

Because of what Paul has said in prior verses, there now exists an important impossibility. This is the Biblical conclusion from the great contrasts of verses 40-49. The old, the natural, the first, the dust, the clay, the perishable is being replaced by all the new that God intends.

⁵⁰ I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

Its Statement

We need to take a moment to unpack the statement of this impossibility.

The natural, fallen, material that makes up this present world is perishing. It is dead, separated from the life of God. It is subject to corruption and disease and will die. It cannot continue forever.

Therefore, it is disqualified and unable to inherit the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is new in quality, imperishable, not of this world and full of eternal life. God's kingdom then cannot be handed over as an inheritance to those who are of this world alone.

Clearly, Paul is thinking of the kingdom of God in a way that is confusing for many Christians. In the Bible and particularly, Pauline eschatology, the kingdom of God is both the absolute sovereign rule of God over everything, even the fallen creation. But that is not the aim of redemptive history. That simply *is* – we call it God's omnipotence and providence. The goal of redemptive history is the establishment of His spiritual kingdom through the resurrection of His Son from the grave this brining the eternal life of God through the Spirit into this fallen realm. It is the start, growth and final culmination of the kingdom in the hearts and lives of men.

But it does not end there.

Its Trajectory

So where is Paul going with this? I want to pause before following Paul's argument to note two trajectories.

The Context

As we saw last week, this assertion and what follows is in the context of the quality and order of the resurrection.

First, the natural -> second the spiritual

This is exactly what we have seen in our study of eschatology. First, the kingdom is prefigured through Patriarchal family and Old Covenant Israel. There was the first, the natural, the expression of the kingdom in the midst of sin and fallenness that actually points forward to the expectation of a greater fulfillment. But now, the kingdom is being clearly portrayed as for the incorruptible, the eternal, the new, the spiritual in essence.

The Challenge

It seems to me that this poses a series problem for the idea of a millennial kingdom. While I understand the concerns and the reasons for holding a strong view of a future millennial kingdom, possibly with Israel at its center, the New Testament simply doesn't have the same vision. Over the last few years, my own study has led me away from affirming that view. Texts like this have challenged my thinking. The whole trajectory of the Bible seems to be an arc from the loss in the garden of Eden, through Noah, the establishment of the family of Abraham, the establishment of the nation and later the kingdom of Israel, the centrality of the Davidic kingdom all landing on Christ, the King. He comes and through his life points forward to what begins at the resurrection and grows until the final day reaches its completion and fulfillment in the New Heavens and Earth. But in between, I see little evidence for a future, earthly kingdom for Israel *in blessing*.

A Glorious Solution

(v. 51-53)

So, how will we inherit the kingdom of God since we cannot in our present, natural, corruptible state? There is a glorious solution to the impossible situation.

⁵¹ Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, ⁵² 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. ⁵³ For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. [ESV]

⁵¹ But let me reveal to you a wonderful secret. We will not all die, but we will all be transformed! ⁵² It will happen in a moment, in the blink of an eye, when the last trumpet is blown. For when the trumpet sounds, those who have died will be raised to live forever. And we who are living will also be transformed. ⁵³ For our dying bodies must be transformed into bodies that will never die; our mortal bodies must be transformed into immortal bodies. [NLT]

I want to think together about what Paul is saying here.

What will happen - the "Rapture"

This is a mystery. This means that without New Testament revelation and explanation, we would not have seen this from the Old Testament. It is there. But it is only seen in the light what the New Testament is now unfolding for us. So what Paul is going to say is a glorious New Covenant truth that now illuminates some bewildering texts and difficult questions.

There will be a transformation. We will all be changed. Now some will not have experience physical death. The phrase "we will not all sleep" is the way the New Testament spoke of death. So not everyone will be a seed sown in the corruption of death to rise in the incorruptible of eternal life. So, what about them? When the Lord returns, how do those who are alive inherit the kingdom? They are transformed. They are changed. They immediately and directly shed the old and put on the new.

There will be a resurrection. Those who have died whose bodies have turned back into dust will rise from the dead. From other texts, we know that the souls of those who have died, God will bring with Him from heaven. Their dead bodies will arise from their burying place. They will rise first. The risen, transformed bodies will join with their souls, experiencing the final step of glorification.

When it will happen - the Day of the Lord

First, it will happen in the shortest instant of time that you can think of. This is not a long, slow, rising process that can be captured on video and shown on the evening news. This happens at the speed of light. If you are alive on that day, you will in one instant be in this body on this earth doing what you are doing and in the next instant be in your glorified body rising to meet the Lord.

It will happen at the trumpet of the Lord. It will happen at "the last trumpet." Now when is that? Paul is not being ambiguous here. He is being very, very clear.

Jesus said in Matthew 24:30-31, "*Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.*"

Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18, "*For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words.*"

When does this trumpet sound? When will this take place? At the beginning of the Day of the Lord. The trumpet is the great announcement of the wrath of God ready to be poured out upon the earth. But, just before He does that, God gathers out His people and this great transformation and resurrection will take place. We will meet the Lord "in the air". And so, we will, from then on, be with the Lord.

Why it will happen - new bodies

So why must this happen? Paul has already shown us conclusively that the old must be put off and the new must be put on. The old, fallen, sin laden, suffering, dying corruptible, rotting in life and in the grave body must be totally transformed and made new to be suitable for heavenliness. It will come from heaven, be like Christ, be essentially spiritual instead of essential physical yet will be a created body in some way connected to and continuous with our present bodies. In some way, our glorified bodies will be recognizably “us”.

How do we know this? Because Jesus’ received a glorified body at His resurrection. He then was recognized as he walked around in this world. He ate food. He was touched by the disciples. He went up into heaven in the glorified body. It is my utter conviction that Jesus is now and will forever be in a body, glorified, yes, but still a human body. The incarnation is everlasting.

And so, we will be like Jesus in another way we don’t think about. The second person of the Godhead, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son, will be in glorified human body. We will have one just like it yet identifiably and uniquely ours. Same serial number; same soul; new chassis and body.

A Final Victory

(v. 54-57)

What a sweet hope for us. When all this happens, there will be a final victory. Death will be defeated.

⁵⁴ When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory.” ⁵⁵ “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?”

⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Its Future Fulfillment

(v. 54-55)

A question – is this a quote from the Old Testament? The first phrase is from Isaiah 25:8 and the second two from Hosea 13:14. Paul is saying that when the resurrection takes place and we pass from the old to the new, then at that moment, what is referred to in this saying will be fulfilled. I think that what we have here may be one of those New Testament hymns Paul sometimes uses or refers to. But the hymn itself is drawn from the two Old Testament texts. The poem, the lyrics are capturing the essence of the texts.

Consider Isaiah 25:1–9 (ESV)

O LORD, you are my God; I will exalt you; I will praise your name, for you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure. ² For you have made the city a heap, the fortified city a ruin; the foreigners’ palace is a city no more; it will never be rebuilt.

³ Therefore strong peoples will glorify you; cities of ruthless nations will fear you. ⁴ For you have been a stronghold to the poor, a stronghold to the needy in his distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat; for the breath of the ruthless is like a storm against a wall, ⁵ like heat in a dry place. You subdue the noise of the foreigners; as heat by the shade of a cloud, so the song of the ruthless is put down.

⁶ On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. ⁷ And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations.

⁸ He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken. ⁹ It will be said on that day, "Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the LORD; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation."

This passage in Isaiah is alluded to in Hebrews 2:14-15, "Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery."

It is also alluded to Revelation 21:1-6:

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. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment.

The second phrase is an allusion to Hosea 13:14 where the destruction of Israel is predicted because of her sins, exemplified by the sins of Ephraim.

Shall I ransom them from the power of Sheol? Shall I redeem them from Death? O Death, where are your plagues? O Sheol, where is your sting? Compassion is hidden from my eyes.

So Paul is pointing us through this triumphant poem to what was in the Old Testament, but hidden until revealed in the New. Thus, it is a mystery. The clear New Testament revelation with the Lord will come at the trumpet just before the Day of the Lord's wrath. He will gather His elect in from the heavens and the earth. Those who remain on the earth will be caught up (thus the word, "rapture") and they will be transformed. At the same time those who have died will be raised from the dead, their souls reunited with a resurrected, but glorified body. And this momentous victory was hidden, but now revealed in the Old Testament with these two texts, wonderfully woven into a hymn, as an example.

But all of this is a great joy for the believer.

Its Present Accomplishment**(v. 56-57)**

⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Here and now there is *TROUBLE* (v. 56) – a sting and a power.

Death's scorpion sting is sin. Not the other way around. It sounds to us as though Paul has said something wrong. Isn't the sting of sin that it brings death? No, that sinners are dead brings the sting of sin. Sin hurts. Sin is the poison. Sinner's present separation from God is the cause of the sting of sin.

Sin's power is law. What? Do we have this firmly in our minds? Are we truly New Covenant people? Do we understand that sin is defined by the law? Do we understand that the law condemns sin? But do we understand that the law cannot give life and cause obedience? Sin in fact uses the law as its own power. It is subversion. But it is true, nevertheless. The law is the power of sin.

But it does not end there...

Here and now there is also *TRIUMPH* (v. 57) – our gratitude and His victory.

Grace has moved where gratitude is present. We give thanks as a consequence of our receiving grace. This is a triumphant note. Funny, Christians can be triumphant over the wrong things and defeated over the right things. Thank God, Jesus has done something about the sting and the power.

Christ's victory is ours. His resurrection is our victory. It is victory over sin and death because it is victory over the power of sin through the law. How? Sin uses the law to stir up the old person we were to crave and commit the sins forbidden. It could only tell us what sin was and then condemn us when we sinned. It had no power to grant life. But the resurrection grants life. Thus, death's sting and sin's power are both overcome by life, the resurrection of Jesus. His resurrection began life in us now and will bring the fullness of life on the last day.

Then, at the rapture, our resurrection on the trumpet day, this triumph will be fulfilled and final. No more trouble, for we will experience the complete triumph of Christ

A Serious Exhortation (v. 58)

So a grand expectation leads to a present, and very serious exhortation.

⁵⁸ Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

Abounding in our Ordinary Ministry

We have our responsibility, to be steadfast, unmovable and always abounding. This is our response to what God has promised and what God has performed. Three words point to a high view and deep commitment to the work of the Lord.

So what is that work? What is the work of the Lord? Some have argued that this is referring to the finished and yet unfulfilled work that Jesus has done in a full

final victory over death. That is a sorely tempting interpretation. The victory attained in verse 57 is the work of the Lord in which we abound.

Except, that is isolating the sentence from what immediately follows it. We are to respond this way not knowing what the Lord has already done, but knowing that our *labor* in the Lord is never empty or vain. It seems to me then that, in light of the resurrection and the final victory, stay at the Lord's work when it is easy and when it hard. For me, what follows in 1 Corinthians 16:10 confirms this interpretation. Paul writes, "*When Timothy comes, see that you put him at ease among you, for he is doing the work of the Lord, as I am.*" Obviously, the phrase here refers to the ministry that Timothy and Paul are engaged in.

So, brothers and sisters, be steadfast, unmovable and abounding in the ministry God has given you, even as Timothy and Paul have demonstrated.

Expecting the Fruitfulness of Hard Labor

Our present labor in the gospel will never be empty, vain or fruitless. Now, Paul uses a different word from the first phrase. The word "work" refers to one's ordinary tasks with which we are familiar, comfortable – that is, our normal work. But the word translated "labor" refers to intense, arduous, difficult, sweat-requiring even wearying hard work.

So, do you believe this? Do you know for sure and certain that even the hard work, the labor, of the work of the Lord, will never be vain or empty? So, believe this in such a way that we expect the fruitfulness of hard labors in ministry.

Reflect and Respond

There is coming a glorious day when you will be changed from all this to all that God has planned. You will either be "raptured" – transformed in an instant – or resurrected.

The resurrection is not just about a future glorious event, but a present available power. The resurrection delivers you from the present power of sin.

Be grateful.

Be transformed.

Think about it much – so that you will be thankful.

Think about it much – so that you will long for it one day.