

TRANSFORMATION AND VICTORY: THE RESURRECTION MESSAGE OF 1 CORINTHIANS 15

Stephen J. Bedard

Introduction:

Communities throughout the world, despite significant cultural differences, share a common curiosity for what happens at the end of an individual's life as well as at the end of human history. Religions seek to answer these questions and this is equally true of Christianity. Throughout the New Testament, from Jesus in the Gospels to Paul in the epistles, there is an acknowledgment that God's purposes for his people cannot be fully accomplished in this life or in this world. As a result, there is much reflection on what the end of natural life is going to be like. One of the most important passages regarding these eschatological questions is found in 1 Corinthians 15. This chapter can be divided into three sections: 1) a list of resurrection appearances of Jesus (1 Cor. 15:1-11), 2) the logical result of the resurrection of believers from Jesus' resurrection (1 Cor. 15:12-34) and 3) a reflection on how the dead are raised and what the resurrection body is like (1 Cor. 15:35-58). This final section can itself be divided into three subsections: a) lessons from sowing seeds (1 Cor. 15:35-44), b) a comparison of the first and last Adam (1 Cor. 15:45-49) and c) a description of the transformation of believers at the last trumpet call (1 Cor. 15:50-58).¹ It is this final subsection and conclusion of 1 Cor. 15 that will be investigated in this paper.

Exegetical Questions:

1. What group(s) of people is Paul referring to?
2. How does this passage fit with the rest of 1 Corinthians 15?
3. How does this passage fit with the rest of 1 Corinthians?
4. How does this passage fit with 1 Thessalonians?
5. How does Paul use the Old Testament in his argument?

Outline:

- I. *The Need for the Transformation* (1 Cor. 15:50)
- II. *The Mystery Which will be Fully Revealed at the Trumpet Sound* (1 Cor. 15:51-52)
- III. *The Need for the Transformation Revisited* (1 Cor. 15: 53)
- IV. *The Final Defeat of Death* (1 Cor. 54-56)
- V. *A Hymn of Thanks* (1 Cor. 57)
- VI. *Final Encouragement* (1 Cor. 58)

Exegesis:

- I. *The Need for the Transformation*

"What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable." (1 Corinthians 15:50)

Previous to this verse, Paul had effectively demonstrated that since Christ experienced a resurrection, it can be assured that Christians who have died will experience a similar resurrection at some point in the future. Having made his point about the Christian dead, in this verse Paul begins to generalize the principles behind the resurrection and prepares the readers for what is to come in vv. 51-58.

There has been much controversy surrounding Paul's use of 'flesh and blood' and 'corruption.' Joachim Jeremias wrote an influential article suggesting that 'flesh and blood' refers to Christians alive at the parousia and that 'corruption' refers to the decaying bodies of the Christian dead.² Robertson and Plummer, writing before Jeremias, took the same position when they interpreted this verse as saying, "If living flesh cannot inherit, how much less dead and corrupted flesh."³ C. K. Barrett agrees when he adds 'of death' after 'corruption' in his translation.⁴

However, there are others who see this as an example of synonymous parallelism where the description of 'corruption' is simply a restatement of what happens to 'flesh and blood.'⁵ F. W. Grosheide suggests that Paul used 'corruption' "to explain to the Greeks the Semitic notion of flesh and blood."⁶ This view of synonymous parallelism seems most likely. For Paul, φθορὰ is not just a reference to decaying corpses:

The [word] group is often used to denote the corruptibility of man, his subjection to death. Paul has in view the outward man who experiences death in himself (2 Cor. 4:16), not as a once-for-all event, but as an ongoing process...⁷

Paul sees all flesh, whether alive or dead as corruption, not necessarily in a moral sense, but rather because a body is not prepared for eternity until it experiences transformation. In some ways, it is not important to determine Paul's precise intention in these phrases, in that Paul does believe that there is a future experience of transformation for both living and dead Christians, as the following verses will show.

II. The Mystery Which will be Fully Revealed at the Trumpet Sound

"Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will 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 will be changed." (1 Corinthians 15:51-52)

For emphasis, Paul uses ‘Behold’ (*ἰδού*) which he does not often use in his letters, to express this great mystery. To do this, Paul assumes the role of the “eschatological prophet.”⁸ In this role, Paul speaks to the Corinthians of a mystery. The ‘mystery’ that Paul speaks of is ‘that which has not yet been realized, but for one who has insight into the way of the Lord, as the apostle and the prophet, is even so not unknown.’⁹ The point is that Paul is revealing a truth previously unknown to humankind in general and misunderstood by the Corinthians in particular. The mystery is that not all Christians will die before the resurrection but all will experience the same transformation. The word order of this verse is irregular, possibly to maintain the alignment between those who sleep and those who are transformed.¹⁰

There is some confusion as to whether Paul believed that he was one of those who would not sleep (a common phrase for death). A number of scholars feel strongly that Paul expected to experience this transformation before death, especially with the emphatic *ἡμεῖς* in 1 Cor. 15:52.¹¹ However, others see a different situation. Perriman notes that the large amount of material devoted to the resurrection of the dead makes it unlikely that Paul believed in an imminent parousia that would require only a relatively small number of Christians being resurrected.¹² Fee explains that Paul’s use of ‘we’ simply means that Paul was currently a part of the group he was speaking of and *if* the parousia happened in his life, he would experience this transformation. The use of ‘we’ really only means that Paul was among the living when he wrote this letter.¹³ If Paul expected the parousia in his life time, we cannot determine that from this passage.

This change will take place in the twinkling of an eye, in an “apocalyptic instant.”¹⁴ The word ‘twinkling’ (*ριπτή*) seems to be a transliteration of either **נִפְגַּשׁ** or **נִרְאָה**.¹⁵ The change is accompanied by the sounding of a trumpet. Paul also uses the image of a trumpet in 1 Thess. 4:16, although this image is not unique to Paul. Trumpets appear in Matt. 24:31 as well as numerous times in Revelation. This image finds its origin in Jewish literature such as Joel 2:1, Zeph. 1:16 and 4 Ezra 4:23. While no subject of *σαλπίσει* is offered, this is an example of a verb taking a conventionally understood subject¹⁶, in this case an angelic trumpeter. At the sounding of the trumpet, two different events will take place. The dead in Christ will be resurrected and be transformed and the Christians who are still alive will be transformed without experiencing death. As Robertson and Plummer state it, “The point is that the resurrection of the

dead and the transformation of the living will be simultaneous, as of two companies obeying the same signal.”¹⁷

The basic transformation that Paul speaks of is a change from corruption to incorruption, a change from susceptibility to death to an invulnerability from death. Murray Harris paraphrases 1 Cor. 15:52 in this way: “The dead will experience a resurrection (i.e., an event), and so they will become permanently immortal (i.e., live in a state of ‘risen-ness’).”¹⁸ The living will also live in this perpetual state of “risen-ness.”

How does this compare with Paul’s earlier teaching in 1 Thess. 4:13-18? There is much in common, especially the reference to both living and dead Christians, as well as the image of the trumpet. The main differences are Paul’s explicit reference to the coming of Christ, and more relevant to this discussion, the lack of transformation language for living Christians in 1 Thessalonians. Grosheide, in his comment on 1 Cor. 15:51, explains this difference:

The argument here is exactly the reverse of that in 1 Thess. 4. There the question is: will the deceased at the moment of Christ’s return receive the same benefits as they that are yet alive? In 1 Cor. 15 however, the point is: will they that are yet alive also enjoy the fruits of Christ’s resurrection, since they have not been sown as those who are deceased.¹⁹

While it is useful to compare 1 Thess. 4 and 1 Cor. 15 in that they both refer to the same eschatological event, caution must be used in interpreting one through the other or even in attempting a determination of the development of Paul’s thought. The different *Sitz-im-Leben* to which these letters address was the primary agent in shaping the material.²⁰

III. *The Need for the Transformation Revisited*

“For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality.” (1 Corinthians 15:53)

In some ways, Paul restates the need for the transformation which he began in 1 Cor. 15:50. This verse states positively what was expressed in 1 Cor. 15:50 negatively.²¹ The use of δεῖ indicates that this is not just an optional experience for Christians to choose at their whim. The corruptible and the mortal (again a reference to both the living and the dead) must be transformed into incorruption and immortality.

Here Paul introduces a new image for this transformation: the act of putting on or being clothed. Perkins sees this language as being used “to guarantee the continuity between the believer and this future existence.”²² This is a very important statement by Paul in the context of

the prevailing philosophical theories of immortality. Many Greek philosophers, including Plato, taught that immortality was an intrinsic part of humanity and that the immortal soul was clothed with flesh. In contrast, Paul is saying that God will take corruptible flesh and clothe it with immortality.²³ This transformation of thought is almost as radical as the transformation of the body that is being described.

IV. *The Final Defeat of Death*

"When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."

"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law." (1 Corinthians 15:54-56)

For Paul, this transformation was more than just another event in salvation history. The resurrection of the dead and the transformation of believers to immortality meant the final defeat of death. In order to express the joy of death's ultimate defeat, Paul turns to the Old Testament, quoting Isa. 25:8 and Hos. 13:14.

Paul's use of the Old Testament has been a source of confusion for interpreters ancient (as seen by the number of variants) and modern. The problem is that it is not clear what version of the Old Testament that Paul is using. In the Isaiah passage, Paul replaces 'forever' with 'in victory,' using, according to Fee, a common LXX idiom.²⁴ However, Paul's quotation differs much from the LXX but agrees fully with Theodotion's later translation.²⁵ It is unknown if there was a pre-Theodotion version of the Greek Old Testament or if Paul's style of quotation happened to follow the same principles that Theodotion would later use. Barrett considers Paul's use of Isaiah in this passage, a free rendering of the Hebrew.²⁶

The problems continue with Paul's use of Hosea. Again Paul makes his own modifications to the LXX passage, replacing 'penalty' ($\deltaίκη$) with 'victory' ($\vικός$) and replacing 'Sheol/Hades' with 'death.' It is interesting that Paul links the two passages with the existing word of 'death' but then continues the link with 'victory' that does not appear in either original passage. The linking of passages containing 'death' is an example of Paul's practice of "pearl stringing" for the purpose of midrashic exposition.²⁷ The modifications to Scripture quotations should not overly concern modern interpreters if Barrett is correct when he says that Paul is not "grounding an argument upon Scripture, but writing freely, in scriptural language, of the ultimate victory over death."²⁸

However, the confusion continues as we reach 1 Cor. 15:56 where Paul seems to pull out of nowhere a reference to sin and death. It would be tempting to see this as a gloss if there was any manuscript evidence. Tomson, using the work of M. Gertner, sees the answer in Paul's use of midrashim to derive two different readings of Hosea 13:14.²⁹ Fee's explanation is that the words from Hosea "apparently touch off a theological chord that must be given a moment's hearing."³⁰ This explanation is simpler and makes more sense. The relationship between death, sin and the law is close to Paul's heart as seen in Rom. 5:12 and 7:7 and this passage demonstrates the truth of that even when Paul is not dealing with those particular issues in the church. The point for Paul is that in the final resurrection and transformation, death will have lost all power, including that connected with sin and the law.

V. A Hymn of Thanks

"But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Corinthians 15:57)

This leads Paul to a moment of praise. For Paul it is very important to remind the Corinthians, who were so proud of their gifts ($\chi\alpha\rho\iota\sigma\mu\alpha\tau\alpha$), that they must give thanks ($\chi\alpha\rho\iota\varsigma$) for the greatest gift that could be given: complete victory over death. It is also important for Paul to highlight the fact that this gift did not come through human effort but "through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Paul describes the giving of victory in the present tense, which according to Barrett, indicates the certainty Paul felt about this truth.³¹ The victory over death takes place in the future when the corruption puts on the incorruption and the mortal puts on immortality. Paul describes this transformation in 1 Cor. 15:51-52 in the future tense. The use of present tense for the future event described in v. 57 may be an example of "present and future forms occur[ring] in sequence, the matter of greater emphasis occurring in the present tense-form."³² Certainly to Paul, the most important event for the Christian is the victory over death that is received through Christ.

VI. Final Encouragement

"Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain." (1 Corinthians 15:58)

Paul does not describe theological truths for their own sake. It is important for Paul that Christians respond to what they have learned through their every day actions. The experience of the Corinthians had been anything but firm, unmoveable and abounding in the work of the Lord. The belief that the Corinthians had already reached their eschatological destiny had retarded their ethical development. Paul's desire is that the great hope of the final transformation of both the living and the dead will spur the Corinthians on to greater faithfulness. All that is done in this life must be done with the knowledge that Christian labour is not in vain in the Lord. The future resurrection of the dead and the transformation of the living is the foundation of this confidence.

Conclusion:

1 Corinthians 15:50-58 is a very important part of Paul's message to the Corinthians. Paul uses this section to expand his argument that he began in the first part of 1 Corinthians 15. Paul had already shown that Jesus did indeed experience resurrection which means that followers of Christ will also experience a similar resurrection. The purpose of 1 Corinthians 15:50-58 is to build on those conclusions by demonstrating that the point of the resurrection is not simply the reanimation of dead bodies. Rather the resurrection is a part of a transformation that is required for all believers, both living and dead, to prepare them for eternity. In this discussion, Paul uses some similar language and imagery as in his description of the resurrection in 1 Thessalonians 4, and yet Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 15:50-58 is very much shaped by their particular situation. Paul also uses some Old Testament quotations to illustrate the results of the resurrection and transformation. In the process, Paul makes significant modifications to the Old Testament passages, indicating that he is not deriving his doctrine from these passages but rather finds their wording useful in illustrating the victory of death that has been promised to Christians.

As much as 1 Corinthians 15:50-58 is a conclusion to Paul's discussion of the resurrection, it is also a conclusion for Paul's overall argument in 1 Corinthians. The Corinthians had misunderstood their eschatological status, believing that their possession of the Holy Spirit put them in their final state. The pride that developed from this mistaken confidence resulted in a degeneration in their ethical behaviour. Paul uses 1 Corinthians 15:50-58 to demonstrate to the Corinthians that they still have much more to experience. As wonderful as the possession of the Spirit is and as impressive as their use of spiritual gifts were, in God's eyes they were still included in the 'corruption', clothed in bodies unfit for eternity. The Spirit that

they possessed was but a promise that at some point in the future, God would transform both the living and dead in Christ by clothing them with incorruption and immortality. Only then would the Corinthians be in their final state and this truth should be the guiding principle in shaping their ethical behaviour.

Stephen J. Bedard has M.Div., M.Th. and M.A. degrees from McMaster Divinity College. He is the pastor of Woodford Baptist Church and First Baptist Church, Meaford.

Endnotes:

¹ P. J. Tomson, “Death, Where is Thy Victory?” *Resurrection in the New Testament*. (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2002), 358.

² Joachim Jeremias, “Flesh and Blood Cannot Inherit the Kingdom of God”, *New Testament Studies*, II, 1955/56.

³ Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians*, International Critical Commentary. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 376.

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- ⁴ C. K. Barrett, *First Epistle to the Corinthian*, Black's New Testament Commentary (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1968), 378-379,
- ⁵ A. C. Perriman, "Paul and the Parousia" *New Testament Studies*, vol. 35, 1989, 514; Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: 1975); Gordon D. Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 798-799.
- ⁶ F. W. Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 391.
- ⁷ Günther Harder, "φθείρω κτλ." *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 103.
- ⁸ Pheme Perkins, *Resurrection: New Testament Witness and Contemporary Reflection* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1984), 306.
- ⁹ Ridderbos, 547.
- ¹⁰ C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of the New Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 168.
- ¹¹ Gerald L. Borchert, "The Resurrection: 1 Corinthians 15" *Review and Expositor*, vol. 80 no. 3 Summer, 1983, 401; William F. Orr and James Arthur Walther, *I Corinthians*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1976), 351; Barrett, 381; Robertson and Plummer, 376 (although Robertson and Plummer qualify by saying Paul did not have confidence but did have an expectation).
- ¹² Perriman, 512.
- ¹³ Fee, 800.
- ¹⁴ Borchert, 412.
- ¹⁵ Moule, 186.
- ¹⁶ Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2004), 78.
- ¹⁷ Robertson and Plummer, 377.
- ¹⁸ Murray J. Harris, "Resurrection and Immortality in the Pauline Corpus" *Life in the Face of Death* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 148
- ¹⁹ Grosheide, 392.
- ²⁰ J. Delobel, "The Fate of the Dead According to 1 Thes 4 and 1 Cor 15" *The Thessalonian Correspondence* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1990), 347.
- ²¹ Ridderbos, 547.
- ²² Perkins, 307.
- ²³ Orr and Walther, 350.
- ²⁴ Fee, 803.
- ²⁵ Tomson, 378.
- ²⁶ Barrett, 382.
- ²⁷ Richard N. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 100.
- ²⁸ Barrett, 383.
- ²⁹ Tomson, 364.
- ³⁰ Fee, 805.
- ³¹ Barrett, 384.
- ³² Porter, 32.