



Regarding the resurrection of all humanity, the Bible states each will be raised “in his own order” (1 Cor 15:23).

FIRST CORINTHIANS 15 AND THE RAPTURE

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The resurrection of the righteous (Luke 14:14; John 5:29) is distinguished from the resurrection of the unrighteous (Rev 20:5, 11-15). The translation of living believers and the resurrection of deceased believers receive much attention in 1 Corinthians 15. The fifteenth chapter begins with an introduction of the Gospel, which “first argues the resurrection of Christ as an essential of Christian faith and hope, and then links this with the resurrection of men in general.”¹ “The grand exception to the doctrine of resurrection”² is the translation (rapture) of living believers. Until that joyful day occurs, God’s people are to remain faithful and true, “always abounding in the work of the Lord” (1 Cor 15:58).

“MYSTERY” IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Revelation concerning the translation of living saints is stated as a “mystery” in the New Testament. Although a mystery is a truth that was not revealed previously by God, it is not something that God intended to withhold perpetually as a secret; God would rather reveal it in the opportune time. When God does reveal a mystery, He intends for it to be taught and for believers to be “stewards” of His revelation (cf. 1 Cor 4:1).

Paul used the word “mystery” on twenty occasions (Rom 11:25; 16:25; 1 Cor 2:7; 4:1; 13:2; 14:2; 15:51; Eph 1:9; 3:3, 4, 9; 5:32; 6:19; Col 1:26, 27; 2:2; 4:3; 2 Thess 2:7; 1 Tim 3:9, 16). The Gospel writers even referred to the mystery of the kingdom of heaven, or

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kingdom of God (Matt 13:11; Mark 4:11; Luke 8:10).³ The Apostle Paul referenced various mysteries, such as the mystery of the resurrection and translation of church saints (1 Cor 15:50-58; 1 Thess 4:14-17); the mystery of the church being composed of both Jews and Gentiles in equality (Eph 3:1-11); and the mystery of Christ and the church (Eph 5:28-32). The incarnation was a mystery (Col 2:2, 9; 1 Cor 2:7). The existence of sin in the presence of a holy and righteous God is revealed as the mystery of lawlessness (2 Thess 2:7). Israel’s present blindness to the Gospel is a mystery (Rom 11:25). There is even the mystery of “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col 1:27). The Apostle John referred to the mystery of the seven stars (Rev 1:20), the finishing of the mystery of God (10:7), and the mystery of the harlot (17:5, 7). Commenting on the usage of mystery in 1 Corinthians 15, Barnes noted:

The word here does not mean anything which was in its nature unintelligible, but that which to them had been hitherto unknown. This commences the third subject of inquiry in this chapter—the question, what will become of those who are alive when the Lord Jesus shall return to raise the dead? This was an obvious inquiry, and the answer was, perhaps, supposed to be difficult, and says that they will undergo an instantaneous change, which will make them like the dead that shall be raised.⁴

The mystery regarding the resurrection is that some believers will not die; consequently, all saints will overcome death either through translation or resurrection at the coming of Christ. When Paul used the Greek particle, translated “behold” (1 Cor 15:51), it was for the purpose of stating this truth emphatically. The use of the particle “has the effect of focusing attention on what follows.”⁵ Indeed, the attention of the reader is demanded to understand the mystery of Paul’s teaching to the Corinthians.



TRANSLATION OF THE LIVING AND RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD

The mystery that Paul revealed to the Corinthians is that not all the church will experience death (1 Cor 15:51). The specific mystery is the instantaneous translation of living saints (1 Cor 15:51-52), because even the Old Testament reader would understand the existence of living saints on the earth in association with the resurrection of the righteous dead (cf. Dan 12:2; Zech 12:10). The teaching not revealed in the Old Testament is the translation of living saints “in the twinkling of an eye.” Some believers will not die physically before the eschatological resurrection of the saints. When Paul wrote, “we will not all sleep,” he was clearly referring to physical death,⁶ and not to “soul sleeping,” which would be in contrast to Philipians 1:23.

The use of the first plural for “sleep” (death) would mean that Paul included himself with those facing the possibility of being translated while living.⁷ Clearly, Paul anticipated this occurrence as an imminent event that could occur in his own lifetime because there were no events to precede it (cf. Tit 2:13). Radmacher commented, “There may be delay, but there would be no necessary prophesied event before the coming of Christ for His church.”⁸ Contrariwise, Morris believed the teaching that the rapture/second coming (which are combined in his posttribulational

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view) could occur in Paul's own lifetime was an illegitimate view: “The plain fact is that Paul did not know when these events would take place, and nowhere does he claim to know. When he says we he means ‘we believers,’ ‘Christians alive at that day.’”⁹ Morris believed that the emphasis was upon how “flesh and blood” will enter the kingdom. In response, if the passage could mean “Christians alive at that day,” then this would include the Apostle Paul. Surely, if Paul believed that the rapture and second coming were one event, and that the tribulation would precede that event, then there would not be emphasis upon being changed “in the twinkling of an eye” without any necessary prophesied events occurring. Without doubt, Paul regarded the imminent translation, which could occur while he was yet living, as an incentive for holy living (cf. Phil 3:20; Tit 2:13).

Scripture also reveals, “we will all be changed” at the rapture. A believer's body may be dead or living at the time of this coming of Christ (1 Thess 4:13-18). Regardless of whether one has “fallen asleep in Jesus” or is of those who are “alive and remain until the coming of the Lord” (1 Thess 4:14-15), all will be changed.¹⁰ Of course, such teaching answers the question, “What will happen to believers who do not die prior to the resurrection?” “How will they experience the resurrection of the body?” “Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God,” so there must be a transformation (1 Cor 15:50; Phil 3:21).

It must be stated that the doctrine of the resurrection itself is not a mystery, since it is taught in the Old Testament (Job 14:14). The truth that living saints will receive their resurrection body by means of an instantaneous translation is a mystery previously unknown. There will be a group of believers who will not experience the intermediate state, which follows physical death and precedes the resurrection of the body (2 Cor 5:10). The rapture will occur “in a mo-

ment, 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 Cor 15:52). The translation will occur

instantly: “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye.” The Greek word for “moment” denotes something that cannot be divided, that is, an indivisible

period of time. The change will occur so quickly that it could be said to occur in the smallest unit of time. A double emphasis is given with the use of the Greek noun translated “twinkling,” meaning a wink, flutter, or jerk of an eyelid.¹¹ Beet remarked that the phrase “in the twinkling of an eye” “dwells upon, and intensifies, the idea of suddenness.”¹² The suddenness of the change is given great emphasis.

RESURRECTION AT THE LAST TRUMPET

The instantaneous change will occur “at the last trumpet.” Interestingly, the Jewish understanding regarding the last trumpet is that it will be seventh in a series of trumpet blows, resulting in the dead being raised and clothed with immortality for the purpose of standing before the “Throne of Glory.”

In the future the Holy One, blessed be He, will resurrect the dead. How will He do it? He takes the Great Shofar and blows it seven times. At the first blast, the whole world shakes and suffers pangs like a woman in childbirth. At the second, the dust is scattered and the graves open. At the third, the bones gather together. At the fourth, the limbs are stretched out. At the fifth, skin comes into being. At the sixth, spirits and souls enter the bodies. At the seventh, they live and stand up on their feet in their clothes.¹³

The New Testament uses the noun “trumpet” eleven times (Matt 24:31; 1 Cor 14:8; 15:52; 1 Thess 4:16; Heb 12:19; Rev 1:10; 4:1; 8:2, 6, 13; 9:14). The verb “to sound a trumpet” occurs twelve times in the New Testament (Matt 6:2; 1 Cor 15:52; Rev 8:6, 7, 8,



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10, 12, 13; 9:1, 13; 10:7; 11:15). The four noun usages and ten verb usages in Revelation 8—11 are in reference to the seven trumpet judgments of the tribulation (Daniel’s seventieth week). The noun usage in Matthew 24:31 is in reference to a great sound of a trumpet following Christ’s coming in the clouds following “the tribulation of those days” (Matt 24:29). The trumpet mentioned in the Olivet Discourse gathers the elect who have survived the tribulation and have been scattered throughout the earth as a result of the persecution of Antichrist and the outpouring of God’s wrath. In the passages related directly to the future tribulation, there is no mention of translation or resurrection in relationship with the trumpets. Conversely, 1 Corinthians 15:52 and 1 Thessalonians 4:16 do not have any reference to judgment; rather, they refer to the resurrection and translation, which should indicate an obvious dissimilarity.

First Thessalonians 4:16 emphasizes the “trumpet of God” that would seem to be logically equated with the “last trumpet” in 1 Corinthians 15:52. Both passages reference a resurrection and translation of believers who are identified as being in Christ Jesus. The purpose of this coming of Christ is not to judge and reign; rather, it is to meet His saints in the air and to have them “changed.” Therefore, it is entirely logical to understand that this last trumpet is referring to the end of the dispensation of the church. It is best identified as referring to the rapture of the church prior to the tribulation, since the trumpets mentioned in the tribulation are associated with the coming of Christ in judgment to establish His visible kingdom on earth.

Some equate the “last trumpet” with the seventh trumpet in Revelation 11:15 and the trumpet in the Olivet Discourse (Matt 24:29-31). For example, one of the arguments expounded by posttribulationists is that the resurrection passages make no reference to an earlier, separate resurrection of all believers, but place the resurrection of all believers at a point prior

to the millennium (cf. 1 Cor 15:23-24; Rev 20:1-4). Posttribulationist Robert Gundry regarded the last trumpet of 1 Corinthians as possibly looking “back to the trumpet at the end of the age in the oral tradition of Jesus’ discourse on the Mount of Olives.” According to Gundry, “the superintendence of the Holy Spirit would have brought about a harmony of meaning” between the trumpet references in the Olivet Discourse, 1 Corinthians 15:52, and the seven trumpets of Revelation.¹⁴ Certainly, it is theoretically possible that the last trumpet of 1 Corinthians 15 could later be connected with the seven trumpets of Revelation. God does, indeed, reveal things progressively. The problem in arguing that God related the last trumpet of 1 Corinthians with later revelation is the issue of context. There is nothing in the context of 1 Corinthians that would indicate a time of intense tribulation upon the whole world that would precede the return of their Lord. Posttribulationists are interpreting the 1 Corinthians 15 passage by forcing the content of Revelation into it. The interpretation of the last trumpet in 1 Corinthians would be changed by the revelation of the seventh trumpet in Revelation.

The issue here is focused upon whether or not “last” is limited only to a given chronological sequence. The usage of the word “last” is not limited to the last in a given chronological sequence; it can also refer to the end of a specific period (or age).¹⁵ Therefore, “last” can refer to the end of something chronologically, as in the seven trumpets of Revelation, or to the end of a specific period (e.g. the dispensation of the church). Gerald Stanton rightly stated, “the fact of subsequent trumpets is no problem” for a pre-tribulationist interpretation of 1 Corinthians 15:52.¹⁶ Even amillennialist Barnes noted, “The word ‘last’ here does not imply that any trumpet shall have been before sounded at the resurrection, but is a word denoting that this is the consummation or close of things; it will end the economy of this world; it will be connected with the last state of things.”¹⁷



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Although God’s plans and purposes for Israel and the church are distinct, both appear to end with the sounding of a trumpet. However, these trumpets are not identical. The “last trumpet” of 1 Corinthians 15:52 is not a reference to the last in any preceding sequence, but is related to the end of a specific age, namely, the dispensation of the church. The significance of the “last trumpet” in verse 15:52 may be twofold. *First*, the last trumpet may be a technical phrase denoting the end of the dispensation of the church. The word last is quite common when referring to events surrounding the end of the church age (Acts 2:17; 2 Tim 3:1-5; Heb 1:2; Jas 5:3; 1 Pet 1:5, 20; 1 John 2:18; Jude 18). *Second*, “last trumpet” may also be a technical phrase indicating the gathering together of the church. E. Schuyler English noted that the sounding of a trumpet in Numbers 10 was to gather an assembly of the people. Therefore, “last trumpet” would be a “rallying call” indicating that the church is changing locations, much like Israel changed camps in the wilderness (1 Cor 15:23).¹⁸

CONCLUSION

At the rapture, the dead in Christ will be raised incorruptible, never to die again. Those church saints who are alive and remain at the rapture will never experience death. Both the dead in Christ and the living saints at the rapture will be raised immortal at the sound of the “last trumpet,” “and as such are now partakers of the future life.”¹⁹ The Christian has a great hope in Jesus Christ. All of mankind is condemned before God as sinners, but victory over the wages of sin is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone as one’s Lord and Savior. He alone can provide the victory through either resurrection or translation. (MC)

ENDNOTES

- 1 John F. Walvoord, *The Return of the Lord* (Grand Rapids: Dunham, 1955), 52.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 As argued previously: “This kingdom could also be called the single, unified, mediatorial kingdom that existed historically under the Mosaic

Covenant and was prophesied by the Old Testament prophets to be restored in its former glory at the second coming. It is the same kingdom John the Baptist preached and Jesus offered to Israel at His first coming; it is, therefore, the same kingdom that Israel rejected in the first century. The kingdom is historic, prophetic, offered, and rejected” (Ron J. Bigalke Jr., “God’s Purpose for the Church – Part IV,” *Midnight Call* [July 2008]: 19).

- 4 Albert Barnes, *Notes on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: Gall & Inglis, 1847), 383.
- 5 Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians*, 2nd ed. (1958, 1985; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 227.
- 6 William F. Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed., rev. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 437.
- 7 For some who disagree that Paul included himself as possibly being one of the living at the resurrection, see Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 354-55; and, A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 6 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1931), 4:198.
- 8 Earl Radmacher, “The Imminent Return of the Lord,” in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, gen. eds. Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 258.
- 9 Morris, *Corinthians*, 227.
- 10 Since Paul stated, “we will all be changed” (1 Cor 15:51) and “even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus” (1 Thess 4:14), Scripture negates the idea of a partial rapture.
- 11 Barnes, *Corinthians*, 384.
- 12 Joseph Agar Beet, *Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Albany: Ages Software, Version 6.02, 1998), 753.
- 13 Rabbi Akiba, *Pesiqta Hadta*, BhM 6:58, as quoted in Raphael Patai, *The Messiah Texts* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1979), 203.
- 14 Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 149-50.
- 15 J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1964), 189.
- 16 Gerald B. Stanton, *Kept from the Hour* (Miami Springs: Schoettle Publishing, 1991), 194-95.
- 17 Barnes, *Corinthians*, 386.
- 18 E. Schuyler English, *Re-Thinking the Rapture* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1954), 109.
- 19 Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 125.