



CHARIS-MATTERS

STUDIES IN FIRST CORINTHIANS

Text

First Corinthians 15:50-58

Topic

Paul reveals the mystery that believers who are alive at the time of the Lord's return to resurrect the church will be changed in the twinkling of an eye

Title

"Twinkle, Twinkle Little Saint"

Introduction

Your eye has three speeds: Wink, blink, or twinkle.

We want to concentrate on the twinkle or, as it is more commonly referred to, the twinkle.

Technically speaking a twinkle is light reflected from the eye. For you to see a twinkle in someone's eye light must travel through the front of their eye, be reflected off their retina, and then exit their eye.

How fast can that occur? I found the following calculation for a twinkle:

Assuming... that you are standing close to that person so the transmission time from eyeball-to-eyeball can be regarded as instantaneous, and that a person's eyeball is 2.5 cm in diameter, the light would have to travel a distance of 5cm... Since the speed of

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light is 300,000 km/sec, this means it would take $1/6 \times 10$ to the ninth power seconds...
or 1/6 billionth of a second to make a person's eyeball twinkle.

That is how fast, if not faster, believers will be changed who are alive at the moment Jesus comes to resurrect the dead.

1 Corinthians 15:52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

It's called the rapture. Not only is it fast when it happens, it could happen any moment.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Changes You Can Believe In Are Imminent, and #2 Choices You Can Implement Are Important.

#1 Changes You Can Believe In Are Imminent

(v50-57)

We've been learning that Jesus Christ is going to return to raise the dead. That's all well and good - **if you're dead when He returns!** What about the believers who are alive at His coming? That's the subject of these closing verses of chapter fifteen.

1 Corinthians 15:50 Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption.

The "kingdom of God" refers to the eternal state or what we commonly call Heaven.

Our current "flesh and blood" bodies are not fit for Heaven. Our bodies are "corruption" whereas Heaven is a place of "incorruption."

If I'm alive when Jesus returns to raise the dead, am I going to have to die before I can be raised? Not at all. In fact, *some of us may never die!*

1 Corinthians 15:51 Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed -

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A Bible “mystery” is something that cannot be known except by revelation which is being explained to you. In this case the mystery being revealed and explained is what happens to living believers at the return of Jesus to resurrect the church.

“Sleep” is how the Bible refers to the death of the believer. Your physical body “sleeps” in the ground awaiting resurrection while your spirit is awake in the presence of the Lord.

Those who are alive will be “changed.” The change is described as follows.

1 Corinthians 15:52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

The word “moment” is the Greek word *atomoi* from which we get the word *atom*. The atom was believed to be indivisible by the Greeks. When used of time, this word referred to a unit of time that could not be divided any further. We might use the word ‘instantaneous.’

We’ve already seen the speed of a “twinkling.”

This change will be accompanied by a “trumpet” that will “sound.” There are lots of trumpets in both the Old and New Testaments. In a time when there was no radio communication trumpets were sounded to give direction to groups, like tribes on the march or armies in battle.

This is not the “last” trumpet ever to be blown. It’s the last trumpet of the Church Age in which we now live. It’s blown to gather together all those who comprise the church - those from the Day of Pentecost in Acts chapter two until the return of the Lord.

Jesus will return and “[raise] the dead incorruptible.” We saw quite a lot about that in the preceding verses.

“And we shall be changed.” Note that Paul included himself among that group. He evidently believed he could be alive at the Lord’s return.

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1 Corinthians 15:53 For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.

In other words, those who are alive when the Lord raises the dead will be changed instantaneously into their glorified bodies without ever dying.

We call this the rapture. The term comes from the Latin verb *raptare*, translated from the Greek word *harpazo*, both meaning 'to be caught up' or 'to be snatched up.'

The rapture is also presented in First Thessalonians 4:13-17.

1 Thessalonians 4:15 For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep.

1 Thessalonians 4:16 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.

1 Thessalonians 4:17 Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.

The big question regarding the rapture is when will it take place. In light of Bible prophecy, you've got four possibilities:

1. The rapture occurs before any part of the seven year Great Tribulation begins. It is a pre-Tribulation rapture.
2. The rapture occurs mid-Tribulation. It is a mid-Tribulation rapture.
3. The rapture occurs sometime after the middle of the Tribulation but before the end. (This is called the pre-wrath rapture because its proponents argue that only the very last days of the Tribulation are the wrath of God being poured-out on the earth. They see the church on earth for lots of persecution from Satan during the Tribulation but removed, raptured, before God pours-out His final wrath).
4. The rapture occurs at the end of the Tribulation as Jesus returns in His Second Coming. It is a post-Tribulation rapture.

I think it's fairly easy to rule-out a post-Tribulation rapture. If believers are raptured just as Jesus descends from Heaven to earth in His Second Coming, then there would be no believers left to enter and repopulate the earth for the one thousand year reign of the Lord.

There are lots of biblical reasons why we believe in a pre-Tribulation rapture.

- The place of the church in the Book of the Revelation supports it.
- The removal of the Restrainer in Second Thessalonians chapter two supports it.
- The twenty-four elders of the Revelation support it.
- God's direct promises to the church that He will keep them out of any portion of the Tribulation support a pre-Tribulation rapture

Perhaps the most convincing argument for the pre-Tribulation rapture is what we call the Doctrine of Imminence. The rapture is always presented to us as imminent - as an event that could occur at any moment. Believers are to be looking for it all the time. I'd refer you to First Corinthians 1:7 & 16:22; Philippians 3:20 & 4:5; First Thessalonians 1:9-10; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 9:28; and Jude 1:21.

If the rapture occurs any time after the Tribulation begins, it cannot be imminent. The pre-Tribulation rapture is the only position that is possible in light of imminence.

Paul began to sing God's praises as he considered the results of the rapture.

1 Corinthians 15:54 So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: "DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP IN VICTORY."

1 Corinthians 15:55 "O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING? O HADES, WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY?"

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Paul quoted from the Old Testament prophets Isaiah and Hosea. Even though those guys didn't foresee the resurrection and rapture of the church, they knew believers would somehow be victorious over death.

"Death" refers to dying and "Hades" refers to the afterlife. Before Jesus Christ rose from the dead, the spirits of all those who died did not go to Heaven. They went to Hades. Hades is not Hell. It is described for us by Jesus in the Gospel of Luke as a place with two chambers divided by an impassable gulf. One chamber is a place of paradise; the other, a place of torment.

When Jesus died, He descended into Hades and He led all those believers who were in Paradise out from there to Heaven. Now when believers die they are absent from their bodies and immediately present with the Lord in Heaven.

When nonbelievers die their spirits still go to Hades, to the place of torment. There they await a resurrection which occurs *after* the Great Tribulation and *after* the Lord reigns on the earth for one thousand years following the Great Tribulation. Once raised, they are judged and confined to the Lake of Fire, more commonly referred to as Hell.

Death and Hades are thus defeated if you are a believer. The worse thing that can happen to you on earth is that you would die - only to be immediately in the presence of your Lord.

1 Corinthians 15:56 The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law.

"Death," "sin," and "the law" provide a concise summary of the Bible's teaching. Death is not merely the result of the natural processes of decay. Death was the penalty decreed in the Garden of Eden should Adam and Eve disobey God.

They did disobey. They died spiritually; they began to die physically; they would have died eternally.

What they did is called “sin.” Because they represented all future humans, sin is imputed to us. It means each person conceived has a record of sin on the books kept in Heaven. Sin is also inherited; we are born with a sin nature. And we commit individual acts of sin throughout our lifetimes.

“The strength of sin is the law” means that God’s Law reveals to human beings they are sinners who deserve the penalty of death. Take any one of the Ten Commandments, for example. “Thou shalt not covet.” Well, everyone has at some time coveted, which is sin. Thus the Law reveals we are sinners and deserve death.

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

“Victory” over death and sin and the law is yours if you are a believer in Jesus Christ.

And the victory is not just in the future, when you are either resurrected or raptured. No, it makes a difference right now.

#2 Choices You Can Implement Are Important (v58)

What you believe ought to affect how you live. Remember Y2K? A lot of people believed something was going to happen. They did something about what they believed. Some stored food and water. Others went so far as to liquidate their assets and move out of cities and into remote areas.

They acted on their belief. So ought we act on our belief knowing that the Lord’s return to resurrect and rapture us is imminent.

How should we act?

1 Corinthians 15:58 Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.

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Paul first reminded them they were “beloved brethren.” Look around. You have an extended family of spiritual brothers and sisters. We are closer than any natural family because we are united by the Lord’s blood and by His indwelling Holy Spirit.

In light of the imminent return of Jesus we are to love one another. If you need a refresher on how, go through the New Testament and list all the “one another” verses.

“Be steadfast, immovable.” These words describe a tenacious hold upon solid Bible doctrine. “Steadfast” means *seated* or *sedentary*. It was used to describe statues. I think it was Paul’s way of telling them they need not look anywhere else, go anywhere else, for truth. Everything that pertains to life and godliness is available in the Word.

“Immovable” expands on the thought of being steadfast as a warning to not be led astray by false doctrines.

Next Paul talked about how you ought to behave. “Always abounding in the work of the Lord.” Let’s take that apart.

The sense of the sentence is, “Work for the Lord in such a way that your labor will not be in vain.” The first thing I would note is that my life on earth, from the time I get saved forward, is to be understood as working to serve the Lord.

Does that mean we must all go into full-time Christian work? No, it means I am to be a full-time Christian in whatever work I do. Whether my employment is secular or spiritual makes no difference.

“Always” tells us that anything and everything is included. Paul wasn’t just talking about the time I might set aside to formally, officially serve the Lord. No, **all** my time and resources are included.

One way we’ve tried to focus attention on “always” is through our Impact Ministry. It sees your daily life, say at work, as a front-line mission field

you've been sent to impact. We pair you up with believers, a supply-line, who commit to praying for you.

“Always” certainly encompasses your serving the Lord by serving His people through the church. It infuses your serving with the sense you are doing it for the Lord. There ought to be a zeal that surpasses your zeal for anything else. Here at Calvary Hanford we use the word excellence to try to capture this understanding.

“Abounding” can be translated *superabounding, in excess, or superfluous*. Wow. I should always go the extra distance, always go overboard in everything. I should never be content to barely show-up or just get by. I should be over-the-top.

If I approach life this way I can “[know] that [my] labor is not in vain in the Lord.” The first thing I’d say about this is that it reminds me that once resurrected or raptured I will have an exit-interview with Jesus. He will review my time as a Christian on the earth to reward me for my service. He won’t be looking for its quantity, its magnitude. No, I will be rewarded based on qualities like being steadfast, immovable, and always abounding.

If I am doing those things, living that way, my labor will not have been in vain in that glorious day. I tell you, it can seem “in vain” now, can’t it?

Here’s the bottom line. The Lord’s return is imminent. It could occur right now. The choices we make everyday are what reveal whether or not we believe it.

Someone ought to be able to examine my life without ever talking to me and conclude that I believe any moment I will see Jesus. They should see me steadfast, immovable, and always abounding in the work of the Lord.

On Y2K nothing happened. Those who had taken precautions at various levels must have felt a little foolish. Or at least others thought they were.

But I’ll tell you, they had the courage of their convictions and acted on what they believed.

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I think Christians need to be more like that. Sure, we might look foolish to the world. We might feel a little foolish even among ourselves.

But in this case, we know for certain that Jesus is coming. Everyday is 'J-Today-K' as far as we are concerned.

If we don't seem a little foolish in superabounding for the Lord, who are we really fooling?