

Coming Changes From Here to Eternity

1 Corinthians 15:12-58

If asked by a pollster to list the greatest changes in our lives the typical answers might include leaving home, marriage, divorce, changing jobs, changing residences, birth of a child or death of a loved one. All of these are significant but not most significant. There are three changes that are most significant of all. One is past for all of us. The three are:

1. Physical birth. While no one remembers conception or birth it was an extraordinary change into existence and life.

2. Spiritual birth. Becoming a Christian is the new birth from spiritual death to eternal spiritual life. It is as dramatic and as significant as physical birth.

3. Heaven birth. This is transformation from this life to the next life. Most often we call this death. We tend to fear it, dread it and postpone it; however, someday we will see it differently. We will celebrate and savor it. Just as we once cried and resisted leaving our mothers' wombs but now celebrate our birthdays, so we shall someday celebrate the day we now fear. We will call it by a new name. It will be our heaven birth day.

There are two ways or two days this future change may come. The first is told about in 1 Corinthians 15:12-26:

But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep

(which is a biblical way of saying death) in Christ then are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

In 1 Corinthians 15:35-58 we are told:

But someone may ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?" How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body. All

flesh is not the same: Men have one kind of flesh, animals have another, birds another and fish another. There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies; but the splendor of the heavenly bodies is one kind, and the splendor of the earthly bodies is another. The sun has one kind of splendor, the moon another and the stars another; and star differs from star in splendor.

So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it

When the bodies we now have die and are planted in the ground they will later produce new resurrection bodies that are related to our earthly bodies but are also significantly different in ways that are hard to explain.

is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.

If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. So it is written: “The first man Adam became a living being”; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit. The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual. The first man was of the dust of the earth, the second man from heaven. As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the man from heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man (Jesus) from heaven.

I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “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. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

What we have here is a comparison on how we get to this heaven birth, whether we die before Christ returns or Christ returns before we die.

Death is difficult. There is no denying death's difficulty. There is no good time to die; there is no good way to die. Like physical birth it is normally a transition with pain and tears.

But, what happens next? The Bible says comparatively little about what theologians call the interim state, that time period between a Christian's physical death and bodily resurrection. But, there are

some things that we do know. From Philippians 1:23 we do know that when we die we are immediately with Jesus Christ in heaven. On the basis of Luke 23:43 we know that the man next to Jesus on the cross was promised to experience paradise the same day he died. I take that to be a conscious awareness of paradise because paradise would not be paradise were we not aware of it. And we know from I Thessalonians 4:16 that we will not have resurrection bodies until sometime later.

Beyond this we “fill in the blanks.” Apparently at the instant of physical death we are consciously in the presence of God in heaven but have some kind of temporary body or other form. There are some Christians who have been dead for thousands of years so for them it's already been a very long period. Then there are others who may go through only moments of that interim state.

What will that be like? Well, suppose you lose all your clothes in a house fire. The Red Cross lends you temporary clothes so you can get by for a short time until your new permanent clothes are ready. In the same way we will have some temporary arrangement in heaven between death and getting our new permanent bodies.

The most important part of what the Bibles teaches is the way we will end up. Here's what we know about our permanent heavenly bodies, what the Bible calls our resurrection bodies. First, we know they will be like Jesus' resurrection bodies. He was recognizable; those who knew him before recognized him. He could touch and be touched. He talked; he traveled; he ate food. He moved instantly back and forth between heaven and earth.

Also, they will be related to our present bodies, only different. The analogy that is used in 1 Corinthians 15 is the comparison between a seed that is planted in the ground and the plant that emerges later. The seed that is put into the ground has to die before the plant can ever be produced. There is a lot of difference between an acorn and an oak tree or an orange and an orange tree. They are related but there are also very great differences. In the same way, when the bodies we now have die and are planted in the ground they will later produce new resurrection bodies that are related to our earthly bodies but are also significantly different in ways that are hard to explain.

A third fact we know is that the bodies we will have for the rest of eternity will be far superior to our earthly bodies. They will be unable to sin. They won't get sick. They won't die.

Yes, we are in for some big but wonderful changes if we die before Jesus comes. But, what if Jesus comes before we die? In 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 we have a capsule summary:

Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. The trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.

All of which is to say that if Jesus comes before we die the end results will be the same but the process will be much easier and quicker.

The return of Jesus Christ includes an event which theologians call the rapture. I believe this could happen at any time. If the rapture occurred right now Jesus would reappear from heaven. Dead bodies would come back to life with new physical heaven bodies, reuniting the saints who have been waiting in heaven with the bodies they left on earth (except their bodies will be completely refurbished for heaven). An instant later, living Christians will immediately switch from our present bodies to our heaven bodies. No death. No pain. No time delay. We'll go to meet Jesus and begin our eternity with him forever.

What will that be like? I don't know; I can only guess. The Bible doesn't tell us a great deal because we probably wouldn't understand the description if we got it. We might say it will be like someone who is born blind and has never been able to see who is suddenly given the gift of sight. Or like a person who was born deaf who can suddenly hear. It's that kind of transformation that will take place at the return of Jesus Christ. It may occur while we're sleeping or eating or walking or talking, but it will happen instantly. All of a sudden we will be completely changed into this resurrection body.

Will we be scared, confused, disoriented? I don't think so because we will get instant knowledge so that we adequately understand what has happened. I base that on words that are found in 1 Corinthians 13:12: *"Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then*

(when all of this occurs) we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." At that instant we will know fully.

So, God will not only transform our bodies, he will also transform our minds. He will enable us to put together things that now are beyond our understanding.

When we know there is a big change coming we usually live differently. If we knew we were going to die in a year we would probably live that year differently. If we knew we were going to inherit a lot of money it would change the way we handle our finances.

If we knew we were getting married there would be lots of planning and anticipation. If we knew we were moving, getting a new job or expecting a baby we would live differently in anticipation of the sure

thing we knew was coming. All of these anticipated changes alter how we live, from the use of time to money to conversation to clothes.

And so it is when we anticipate the really big changes to come if we die before Jesus returns or if Jesus returns before we die. Knowing what's coming should change the way we now live. It should change our conversation, our finances, our friendships, our plans and our priorities. That's why 1 Corinthians 15 ends with the words, *"Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain."*

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