

The Change of the Living

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The Context of the Change.

1. The Bible is “about” answering the question, “How does God redeem humanity?” We see how God deals with humanity by the way of judgments (Noah), Covenants (Abraham, Moses), and promises (David). It is instructive to realize that during these times of God’s heightened redemptive and revelatory activity, that God was dealing with the particular individuals who were alive at those particular times, but that his activity was *applicable* to all his covenant people at all times. E.g., see Paul’s surprising language in 1 Cor 10:1-11, or how the writer of Hebrews speaks of his contemporaries in 11:39-12:1, referencing the “cloud of witnesses” who would have to wait for them to finish their race before being “perfected” (11:40).
2. So when we talk about a particular company of saints undergoing a “change” or “alteration” of body during one of God’s great redemptive acts, it should not strike us as something so far out that it can’t be believed. Do you believe that the elders of Israel *actually* ate and drank in the very presence of God on Sinai (Ex 24:9-11)? I mean, come on, that is “crazy”!!! Do you believe Enoch was removed from the earth (Gen 5:21-24)? The point is that the history of redemption is replete with “exceptions to the rules” for normal human lives. Indeed, this is how we know these are *God’s* activities, right?
3. The “change of the living” witnessed to in the New Testament, is, then, yet one more of God’s redemptive actions that he performed in the first century, and it was one in a long list of supernatural interventions that God performed during this time of redemptive fulfillment that has been aptly coined by Barth as the “Christ event.” (NB: this is not to endorse everything Barth taught, just to say he coined a good theological descriptor here.) More to the point, we will see that the change of the living is intimately tied in with the Parousia of Christ and the resurrection of the dead.

Looking at the Relevant Texts:

1. Paul says on a number of occasions that **he himself** expected to “present” (Gk. *paristemi*) the very people to whom he was writing before God some day. This word was often used to describe the activity of bringing an offering before a deity, and this usage fits well for these passages. This had always confused me. He says it twice, namely, 2 Cor 11:2 (as a virgin bride), and Col 1:28 (as complete in Christ). I was confused because first of all, Paul was not sure he would even be alive at the *Parousia* in his earlier letters. But then in 2 Tim 4:6, he is clear that he will be dead before the *Parousia*. But if Paul was saying that he would be “presenting” the people to whom he was writing before the Lord, some of whom were alive on earth at the time of the *Parousia* when Paul would have been in the heavenly realm, how would that work out? This is just one of many conundrums that are solved when it is accepted that Paul understood that the people to whom he was writing would **not** be on earth at the *Parousia*, but would be in the heavenly realm *with* him. In fact, a lot of such conundrums are solved with this understanding, many of which are treated quite well by Ed Stevens in his book, *Expectations Demand A First Century Rapture*.

1 Cor 15:50-54: ⁵⁰ And this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood the reign of God is not able to inherit, nor doth the corruption inherit the incorruption; ⁵¹ lo, I tell you a secret; we indeed shall not all sleep, and we all shall be changed; ⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, in the last trumpet, for it shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we -- we shall be changed: ⁵³ for it behoveth this corruptible to put on incorruption, and this mortal to put on immortality; ⁵⁴ and when this corruptible may have put on incorruption, and this mortal may have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the word that hath been written, 'The Death was swallowed up -- to victory; (YLT)

This text ties in with the idea of God's people being "presented" to him "as a virgin" (using marriage language) or "spotless and blameless" (using sacrificial language) since Paul is suggesting that people would not be allowed into the heavenly realm (i.e., into God's presence in the afterlife) unless they actually *were* in this pure state. Indeed, in this passage Paul is specifically discussing the *kind of body* that the dead saints would be inheriting at the resurrection. His emphasis is on the idea that the resurrected body is *incorruptible* as well as *imperishable* (or *immortal*). And this is *how they would be* at their resurrection. But then Paul reveals a "mystery," namely that not all of them would die! ("Sleep" is **clearly** a metaphor for Christian death). Look carefully at vs. 51. Also, he says that those who would not die would find themselves "clothed" ("may have put on" uses a verb, *enduo*, that refers to the act of clothing) with incorruption and immortality, indicating that they would have the *same kinds of bodies* as those who had been raised from the dead. This also indicates the nature of the change, in that the identity of the persons (the "inner man") who will undergo the change will be intact, but the kind of body (what people "wear" or are "covered by" (e.g., see 2 Pet 1:14)) is altered.

The other feature of this text that I want to point out is that Paul is seeing the change of the living as a fulfillment of prophecy. In verse 53 he uses *dei*, meaning "it is necessary" that "this corruptible" should put on incorruption. That is, *this body* (that we now possess) which is capable of corruption (Paul is careful to use an *adjective* here) must (Gk. *dei*) *itself* put on incorruption, which is exactly what the resurrected dead would be inheriting. He then uses the same language for "mortal" (again, an adjective in the Greek) and immortality. There are two prophecies that Paul alludes to here, Isaiah 25:8 and Hosea 13:14.

1 Thess 4:13-18: ¹³ But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. ¹⁴ For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. 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 not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of *the* archangel and with the trumpet of God, and **the dead in Christ will rise first.** ¹⁷ **Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air,** and so we shall always be with the Lord. ¹⁸ Therefore comfort one another with these words. (NASB)

This is the second key text where Paul indicates that God will be changing the living members of his audience at the *Parousia*. The context of the passage is established in verse 13; the Thessalonians were concerned for their brethren who had died after receiving the gospel, and Paul was “comforting” (or “encouraging”) them regarding their feelings of grief. What Paul reveals to them is that not only will they not miss their brethren, but will be joined with them into a heavenly place at the time of the Lord’s *Parousia*. And not only that, but those who had died will be resurrected first (that is, receive their incorruptible and imperishable bodies) before they, (after being changed), are “snatched up” with them. And Paul lays out the sequence of how everything is going to work out in verse 17. (And remember, Paul is speaking by “word of the Lord,” that is, this is a God-supplied revelation, similar to the “I tell you a mystery” language of 1 Cor 15.) Verse 17 strikes me as one of the most carefully worded sentences in the entire New Testament:

- a. Paul is careful to use a time marker, *epeita*, which means “the next thing in sequence.”
- b. He then uses two articular participles after the “we” pronoun (*hemeis*) that act as *adjectives* that modify “we,” so it is particularly clear exactly whom he means by the “we.”
- c. He uses the phrase *hama sun autois* (“together with them” or “at the same time with them”) to make it clear that those who are living and remaining will be **the same ones** who will, **with** the resurrected dead, be joining in the Lord’s “meeting” in the air.
- d. He finishes with a “*houtos*” phrase to emphasize that their state of being with the Lord will be a permanent situation. *This also indicates that they must be living in their incorruptible and immortal bodies at this event* since they are in such a permanent situation.
- e. The sentence is, in general, very logically laid out, with a clear hierarchy, and without a moving around of words as is typically done in Greek for emphasis purposes (i.e., the flow of the words follows the flow of the events.)

2 Cor 5:1-4¹ For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.² For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed [over]³ with our dwelling from heaven, inasmuch as we, having put it on,⁴ will not be found naked. For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed but to be clothed [over], so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life. (NASB)

Murray Harris says of this passage, “No passage in 2 Corinthians has prompted more discussion than this. As a consequence, the diversity of scholarly interpretation is rather bewildering.” (*Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 10, p. 346) I am supposing that Paul’s resurrection discussion and his “mystery revelation” caused quite a stir among the Corinthians, so had become the “talk of the town.” The language Paul uses in this section of 2 Corinthians is quite similar to that used in 1 Cor 15, which gives credence to the idea that that text (1 Cor 15) is behind his discussion here. The context is that of Paul recounting and giving context to the suffering that himself and his fellow preachers are enduring for the sake of the gospel and its followers, thus the “us and you” language in 4:12. But then the language becomes inclusive in verse 4:14 (“He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will present us with you.”) It is somewhat difficult to follow the antecedent of the usage of the pronoun “we” in a few places, but what is obvious and important is that he is using key concepts that are found in the 1 Cor 15 as well as the First Thessalonian passages we looked at. For instance:

- a. He uses the phrase “we who are living” (4:11) as in 1 Thess 4:15 & 17. It is precisely the same in the Greek (*hemeis hoi zontes*).
- b. The idea of “clothing” is used (as in 1 Cor 15:53-4). (The verbs translated “put on” or “put over” refer to the act of clothing). It is interesting to note that the verb Paul uses here in verses 2 & 4 are slightly different than the one used in 1 Cor, namely *ependuo*, vs. *enduo*, which depicts the putting on of an *outside* garment. So in this instance Paul is emphasizing that the bodies of those who would be living at the time of the *Parousia* would be *clothed over* their existing bodies. Indeed, if we look closely at verse 2 he is using the metaphors of a “(terrestrial) house” being clothed over with an “dwelling from heaven” Verse 3, as some commentators have suggested, may have been added by Paul in order to emphasize to the people in Corinth that the people who would be experiencing the change would not ever be bodiless (as there was apparently a faction that supported the Greek idea of a bodiless afterlife). (See Harris, p. 347, and the NIGTC on this verse). It should also be noted that there is a textual variant for verse 3. The NA27 reading is “having been stripped”, but there is actually pretty strong evidence that the original reading should be “having put on” or “having been clothed.” Most, if not all, translators prefer this reading. And assuming this is the case, then what Paul is intimating is that persons would essentially “skip” the process of becoming naked before being clothed in the heavenly realm, which harmonizes with what is being taught in the two “rapture” passages we have looked at so far.
- c. The phrase “the mortal might be swallowed by the life” is similar to 1 Cor 15:54 “Death was swallowed into a victory!” The word “mortal” is used as a synonym for “death” earlier in the same verse, so we see he is using language *very* similar to a passage that is specifically referring to living people who are changed.
- d. As a side note, Paul uses the verb “present” that I talked about earlier in 2 Cor 4:14. He makes it clear that himself, his fellow apostles (who had died and been raised), as well as his audience, will all be “presented” *together*. This harmonizes with the text of 1 Thess 4:17. Also, this verse may provide a localized backdrop for 5:1-4 since the “presentation” will take place in the heavenly realm, and people would need to be properly “clothed” for the occasion. A key lesson to be taken away from this is that Paul has moved beyond the “revelation” phase of discussing the nature of the resurrection body and the change of the living and the rapture, and has moved into *using these ideas* for the purposes of teaching and illustration in this lengthy discussion of the nature of apostleship.

1 John 3:2: Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. (NASB)

This text suggests that John’s audience will become like Christ when he is “made manifest” (at his *Parousia*), that is, they will be transformed to his realm and have a similar kind of body.

Phil 3:20-21: ²⁰ For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; ²¹ who will transform the bod[ies] of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself. (NASB)

This text combines many of the elements from all of the previous texts we have looked at. Namely, that the bodies of the saints to whom Paul was writing were expected to be “transformed” to become like Christ’s body when he arrived from his heavenly abode as Savior. This idea is similar to what we see in 1 John 3:2, but is also supported in 1 Cor

15. The verb describing the “transformation” in this passage is different than our other verses (Gk. *metaschematizo*). This verb focuses on the idea of an *outer change*, so that the inner person remains intact. This harmonizes with the usage in our 2 Cor passage, where Paul, in using the verb “clothe upon” to describe the bodily change, is emphasizing the continuity of the inner person. Also, we note in this passage that this activity is something that the *Lord* will himself do as an act of power, and that he does these things in the heavenly realm (where his “body of glory” resides).

There is a grammatical issue with some translations of verse 21. Many translations translate this as “our lowly body” (ESV), or “the body of our humble estate” (NASB). But I submit that the translations “our weak mortal bodies” (NLT) or “these humble bodies of ours” (NET) are more accurate in that they properly recognize that the normal way a Greek would have wanted to emphasize individual items within a group would be to combine the singular form of the item (“body”) with the plural form of the group (“our”), so in English we should say “our bodies” instead of “our body.” This is a very common grammatical construction in the New Testament, and there are many examples where this is the only way the construction makes sense. So it is quite clear that Paul is talking about the particular bodies of the individuals within the Philippian church. This idea is furthered when we look back at the discussion in 2:8-9 where Paul is talking about (the one) Christ moving from lowliness into glory, so that in context Christ then becomes a *prototype* for any of the individual Philippians who similarly choose to humble themselves, indicating what they might expect as a result of their humility.

Summary

We notice there are a few key ideas that anchor these texts regarding the anticipated change of the living. Among them are the ideas of *presentation*, *clothing*, death being *swallowed*, the mention of the activity in the *heavenly* realm, as well as a clear *distinction* between the dead and living saints at the time of the *Parousia*.

By looking for these kinds of markers, we are aided in getting a fuller picture of what happened during these days of the Lord’s great redemptive activity. For instance, the word for “meeting” (1 Thess 4:17) is only used four times in the New Testament, including twice in Matt 25:1, 6. Does this tie these two passages together?