THE FIRSTFRUITS AND THE LAST TRUMP

Catechism Two, Lesson 29

Reading: 1 Corinthians 15:20–28

1. What Does Paul Mean By The Term “The Firstfruits Of Them That Slept”?

As we have already mentioned, sleep was one way to talk about death. Paul is declaring that Christ was the first of many to experience resurrection from the dead. The term “firstfruits” is borrowed from the Old Testament. It is the name of one of the major Jewish feasts.

Each year the males of Israel were required to assemble before the Lord to celebrate several feasts. All work was suspended in order to provide time for worship. Many of these feasts related to the harvest calendar. Firstfruits began this calendar with the wave offering of a small amount of grain, a sheaf. On the day after Passover Sabbath, a sheaf of new corn or barley was brought to the priest and waved before the Lord (Lev. 23:9–14). This offering was a pledge and assurance that the remainder of the harvest to be gathered was also the Lord’s. Until this ceremony had been performed, no grain could be eaten and no harvest work could be done, according to Josephus the historian.

This feast was also a type of Christ’s resurrection. Until He was resurrected and accepted by the Lord, no other harvest could follow. Historically, Christ rose from the grave on this very day—the day of firstfruits. Paul understood the theological implications of this. Christ is the head of a whole new harvest. Just as Adam was the head of a whole race of men born in death, so Christ was the head of those who would likewise experience resurrection from death. Christ’s resurrection was the firstfruits or guarantee that we too will be raised from the dead. Listen to Paul’s words to the Corinthians:

But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept. For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive (1 Cor. 15:20–22).

The fact that Christ became our firstfruits has a threefold significance:

A. Jesus is the sample of the resurrection we will experience if we belong to Him. He is the source of a new kind of life—a life that overcame the doom of death and expresses the glory of God.

Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is (1 John 3:2).

B. Jesus gave His life in order to communicate it to many others. Had He not died for us, He would have been alone in having eternal life.

… Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit (John 12:24).

Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:5,6).

C. Jesus is the first in a series of resurrections. He is the pledge and guarantee of more to follow. He is like the sheaf waved before the Lord at firstfruits which represented the entire harvest that would follow.

But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ’s at his coming. Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power (1 Cor. 15:23, 24).

2. Are The Dead Raised At Different Times?

Yes. We can list the order of resurrection as follows:

A. Firstfruits: the resurrection of Christ Himself and those who came out of their graves at the same time.

And the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose, and came out of the grave after his resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many (Matt. 27:52, 53).

B. They that are Christ’s at His coming.

For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord (1 Thess. 4:16, 17).

C. The resurrection of the unrighteous dead at the end of this age.

But the rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished … (Rev. 20:5).

D. The destruction of death itself after the Great White Throne Judgment.

And death and hell [Hades or Sheol] were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:14, 15).

E. The renovation of the heavens and earth—the emergence of a new heaven and a new earth after purging by fire.

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea (Rev. 21:1).

3. Will Everyone Experience Death and Resurrection?

This is the norm. The Bible teaches us all to prepare ourselves in this life to face death, resurrection, and judgment. We are told very plainly:

And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment (Heb. 9:27).

Nevertheless, we are told of two exceptions in the Old Testament: Enoch and Elijah (Gen. 5:21–24; 2 Kings 2:1–13). We also have the promise that some believers will be caught up directly into Christ’s presence without tasting death at His coming. The Bible term for this direct transition from mortal life into immortal life bypassing death is “translation.”

By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death; and was not found, because God had translated him: for before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God (Heb. 11:5).

The Greek verb rendered “translation” is metatithemi. It means “to transport or transfer from one location to another; to remove; to transmute or change by the abolition of one thing and the substitution of another.” The Apostle Paul emphasizes the instantaneous nature of this change, when he says:

Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality (1 Cor. 15:51–53).

Whether we are living or have already died at the time of Christ’s return, we must be changed. The catching away of the living who are in Christ is sometimes called “the rapture.”

4. When Will This Tremendous Change Take Place?

In a moment, the dead shall be raised and the living caught up to meet them—those, that is, who are in Christ. Does the Bible tell us exactly when this moment of change will occur? Yes, it does. This change, which includes our bodies, will not take place until the coming of Christ; it does not happen to some especially “spiritual” people in advance (Rom. 8:18–25). This moment of change is specified as being at “the last trump.”

In the book of Revelation, from chapters 8–11, we are told of the sounding of seven trumpets. Each of these trumpets are sounded in sequence by angels. When the seventh or last trumpet sounds, it will announce the coming of Christ (Rev. 11:15–19). Several events accompany the sounding of this last trumpet:

a. Great voices declare that the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of His Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever (v. 15).

b. Twenty-four elders proclaim that Christ has taken to Himself His great power and has reigned (v. 17).

c. The nations become angry and God’s wrath is poured out. The experiencing of His wrath means great tribulation for those left on earth (v. 18).

d. The Judgment Seat of Christ determines the reward of God’s servants, prophets, saints, and those who fear God (v. 18).

e. The Temple of God in heaven is opened and the ark of the covenant is seen. This means the restoration of access into God’s full presence (v. 19).

Two other Scripture passages mention the sounding of the last trump: 1 Thessalonians 4:13–17 and 1 Corinthians 15:51, 52. All of these are in harmony with one another. The actual sequence of Christ’s coming and the catching away of those alive in Christ along with the raising of those who died in Christ is given in 1 Thessalonians 4:16, 17:

(1) Christ shall come down to earth from heaven, accompanied with the voice of the archangel and with the trump of God (v. 16).

(2) The dead in Christ shall rise first (v. 16).

(3) We which are alive in Christ at that time will be caught up together with those resurrected, to meet the Lord in the air (v. 17).

5. How Should Knowledge Of The Coming Resurrection Affect Our Present Living?

The Bible calls the anticipation of resurrection “that blessed hope” (Tit. 2:13). When we anticipate something, we not only wait for it, but we also prepare for it. The fruit of this hope of resurrection is the changes that will manifest themselves in our day-to-day living.

A. We purify ourselves in thought, word, and deed.

And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure (1 John 3:3).

This means the determined and deliberate elimination of all sin from our lives.

B. We endeavor to live with others in peace and to be blameless in our own conduct.

Wherefore, beloved, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless (2 Pet. 3:14).

Diligence is the exact opposite of carelessness. Resurrection hope stimulates in us a consistency of self-discipline.

C. We learn to deny ourselves in order to develop practical righteousness.

For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ (Tit. 2:11–13).

If we really hope to pull up anchor very soon, we will not at the same time become entangled in the things of this world.

D. We forget the past and press toward our goal in Christ.

That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead.… Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus (Phil. 3:10, 11, 13, 14).

We do not let the past condemn us or lull us into self-reliance. We keep our eyes on the goal.

E. We comfort and build up each other.

For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ, Who died for us, that, whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with him. Wherefore comfort yourselves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do (1 Thess. 5:9–11).

As the day approaches, we will need more and more encouragement. Outside pressures will increase before the coming of the Lord. We will need each other all the more.

Home Study: Lesson 29

Name\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1. What was the feast of firstfruits?

2. What is the threefold significance of Christ becoming our firstfruits?

a.

b.

c.

3. List the orders of resurrection.

a.

b.

c.

d.

e.

4. What two men in the Old Testament did not die?

a.

b.

5. In what ways does the hope of resurrection change our present living?