

The Resurrection's Motivating Power

1 Corinthians 15:29-34

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In our text, 1 Corinthians 15:29-34, Paul says, “Otherwise, what will they do who are baptized for the dead, if the dead do not rise at all? Why then are they baptized for the dead? And why do we stand in jeopardy every hour? I affirm, by the boasting in you which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die daily.” Paul is talking about the physical suffering and danger of death that he endures for serving for Jesus Christ, who died and arose. “If, in the manner of men, I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, what advantage is it to me? If the dead do not rise, ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!’ Do not be deceived: ‘Evil company corrupts good habits.’ Awake to righteousness, and do not sin; for some do not have the knowledge of God. I speak this to your shame.”

It has been said—and I believe it's true—that what you believe determines how you behave. I believe that a summary of this passage that we just read is Paul saying, “What you believe determines how you behave.” Because some in Corinth were denying the resurrection of the body, they were acting a certain way.

Verse 12 is the key to understanding this chapter. Paul says, “Now if Christ is preached that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?” This was the reason Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 15: There were some who were misinformed; they were believing false teaching that our bodies would not be resurrected. Now they were not denying the Resurrection of Jesus. They admitted that. But they didn't believe that their bodies would be resurrected.

So Paul did three things to show them. Number one, he gave us the historical argument, verses 1-11, that if Jesus rose from the dead, our bodies will rise from the dead. Number two, he gave them the logical argument, verses 12-19, showing that if Christ is not risen, our faith is vain, our preaching is vain, you're still in your sins, those who have died in Christ have perished and if in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. Number three, is the theological argument, verses 20-28. In this theological argument, he shared four truths: The bodies of the dead in Christ will rise, verses 20-22; the stages of the resurrection were given in verses 23-24; death will be destroyed, verses 25-26; and Christ will subdue all things and reign at the right hand of the Father, verses 27-28. That a very quick overview.

Today we come to the fourth section of 1 Corinthians. We move from the historical argument, to the logical argument, to the theological argument, and now to the practical argument. Paul is saying in our text that if you deny this critical and important doctrine of the resurrection, you lose three spiritual motivations. What you believe will determine how you behave. If you deny that our bodies will be resurrected, it is going to affect your spiritual life in these three areas.

The first area is the impetus or motivation to evangelize and to baptize converts. Why preach the Gospel and bring people to salvation if there is no life after death, if there is no hope beyond

the grave? Look at it in verse 29. This is now a change in the flow of the text. Paul moves from the theological argument to the practical implications. Paul says, "What will they do who are baptized for the dead, if the dead do not rise at all?" This is the first question. The second question is, "Why then are they baptized for the dead?"

A confession of a preacher—this is a verse that I am telling myself that I am crazy for even dealing with it. Every commentary I've read said—and I agree—that this verse is one of the hardest verses, if not the hardest, in all the Bible to interpret. I agree with that.

What is Paul saying here when he says that they are "baptized for the dead"? "What will they do who are baptized for the dead, if the dead do not rise at all? Why then are they baptized for the dead?" Most people get wrapped up trying to interpret the text. That's good and I understand that. But I think we are missing the thrust of what Paul is actually saying.

Let me first tell you what it is not saying. It is not saying that we living saints can be baptized in proxy or vicariously for people who have died so that they can go to heaven. This is what the Mormons teach from this verse, and it is wrong, because it is contrary to the majority and clear teaching of the Bible. This is the only place in the Bible where you have a reference to baptizing for the dead.

Let me give you a principle for interpreting Scripture. Whenever you have a single text that is obscure or unclear, be careful to build the doctrine on that one verse that contradicts multiple other verses that are clear. So the multiple, clear teachings of the Bible take precedence over the few verses that are confusing.

Paul is not saying that we can be baptized for dead people so that they can go to heaven. Let me give a couple of clear reasons why. Number one, the Bible doesn't teach that. Number two, the Bible teaches "by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works." And the Bible teaches that baptism doesn't save us. Baptism is a rite or an ordinance. There are two ordinances for the church: One is communion and the other is baptism. They are symbols; they don't have any ability to save us. Communion cannot save you, and baptism cannot save you. It is an outward showing of an inward reality or work. So we are saved by grace. Baptism cannot save you, let alone someone else for whom you would be baptized.

So what then is Paul saying? We can't be sure and we can't be dogmatic. But some feel that Paul is basically saying that they are baptized in the place of those who are dead in the sense that a believer lived a Christian life, died in the Lord, an unbeliever saw them and was influenced by them, so they accepted Christ because of their testimony, they were brought into the church, the family of God, and they were baptized in the place of and filled the void that the dead person held. So the person is saved and comes to Christ, and they die and go to heaven.

Now that's a possible interpretation. It's not the one I favor, but it is interesting that when Stephen was being stoned, Saul was there witnessing it. I believe that Stephen's death had an

impact on Saul's life. Stephen died and went to heaven, but the Lord convicted Saul, because of Stephen's life, and Saul believed Jesus, he was baptized and was brought into the church. You might say, in a sense, that Saul was baptized for the dead, because Stephen's life had an impact on Saul.

But there is a simpler view, and one that I would lean toward, but I can't be dogmatic about it. The church at Corinth was full of all kinds of foolish practices; they were doing all kinds of unbiblical things. It is very possible that they were so messed up that some of them were baptizing for the dead. And Paul isn't approving of it, but he's not condemning it either, because it was a side issue; he doesn't want to get sidetracked. Paul just mentions the fact that it is inconsistent to be baptized for anyone if Jesus did not raise from the dead and our bodies will not raise from the dead.

So what he is showing them is that it is illogical for them to be baptized for dead people, if the dead are not going to rise. Why would you be baptized for a dead person, if there is no resurrection? He is showing them this inconsistency in their practice. We do know that many pagan groups practiced baptism for the dead, and maybe it came into the church at Corinth.

The use of the pronouns that Paul uses is interesting in verse 29. Notice, "What will they..."—the third person plural—"...do who are baptized for the dead, if the dead do not rise at all? Why then are they baptized for the dead?" But then notice that in verse 30, he says, "And why do we..." So he changes to first person plural, and he includes himself. Then in verse 31, he says, "I affirm, by the boasting," first person singular. So he changes the personal pronouns.

So I think he is talking about the practice of some that he doesn't endorse, that he doesn't say is good or that you should do it. Nowhere in the Bible is baptism for the dead taught. He's showing them how illogical it is.

But don't miss Paul's main point. It is that baptism is foolish if the dead do not rise. Our preaching is foolish, our faith is foolish, our evangelism is foolish and our baptizing is foolish.

Jesus gave us what is called "the great commission." Jesus said, "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature." He also said, "baptizing them." Synonymous with preaching the Gospel and people being saved is that they are to be baptized. Baptism doesn't save them; it's the Gospel that saves them. They come to faith in Christ. But we are to baptize true believers.

Now you don't have to be baptized to go to heaven, but you should be baptized as an obedient, committed Christian. If you haven't been baptized, you should be baptized. It's a public demonstration that you have decided to follow Jesus Christ. But our great commission also includes the commission to baptize "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." So baptism for the believer is identification with Christ in His death, burial and Resurrection.

This is why we do baptism by total immersion. It's symbolic for being in the grave; you're buried

and your sins are buried. The old you is dead. This is why we bring you up out of the water: you are risen with Christ. So you are dead and buried with Christ, and you are risen with Christ.

I laugh over the years in baptizing people. Christians have often said to me, "Pastor John, you won't take me too deep; will you? Don't hold me down too long." I assure you that I have never lost anyone in baptism. I did have one guy say, "Hold me down a long time. I got a lot to bury!" But we always bring them up out of the water. If you're freaked out, don't worry; we'll bring you up out of the water, and you won't drown. So it's a picture; you die with Christ and you rise with Christ, so you should walk in newness of life. Paul says it like this in Romans 6:5: "For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection."

So the overarching principle, the overarching concept, is the idea that we don't need to evangelize and we don't need to baptize if there is no life beyond the grave. What you believe is going to affect how you behave.

Let me give you the second lack of motivation if we deny the resurrection of the body. It's in verses 30 and 32. That is to serve and to suffer for Christ. There is no motivation to serve the Lord and to suffer for His sake if there is no life beyond the grave. Notice what Paul says. "And why do we stand in jeopardy every hour?" Why do we live for the Lord and endanger our very lives? Every hour we are in danger by following Jesus Christ. He says, "I affirm, by the boasting in you which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die daily."

One of the amazing statements Paul makes is that every day, he faces death. He's not talking about dying with Christ spiritually; he's talking about physically being in danger of being martyred and being put to death. In those days, if you were a Christian, it could be your life. In parts of the world today, if you become a Christian and get baptized, you could be put to death. You could be killed for your faith in Jesus Christ. Why do that if there is no resurrection from the dead?

Then Paul asks this question: "If, in the manner of men, I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, what advantage is it to me? If the dead do not rise...." You see the logic Paul is giving us? He is asking that if there is no God, there is no life after death, no resurrection, no eternal life, then why should he live for the Lord? Why should he deal with the opposition? He calls it fighting "with beasts at Ephesus."

There is no reference in the book of Acts of Paul being thrown to the beasts. Some say that because Paul was a Roman citizen, he wouldn't be thrown into the arena, so it's possible he speaks metaphorically here about the silversmiths' riot when he was in Ephesus, when they were persecuting Paul and he was beaten. So Paul was saying he fought with these "beasts" or these evil men who opposed him. So Paul suffered and he went through great difficulties. He went through hardships.

But the point is the question at the end of verse 32: What advantage is it to Paul if the dead do

not rise? And if that is true, this is how we should live: “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!”

This is what is known as “hedonism.” It’s the Playboy philosophy. If God isn’t real and Jesus didn’t die for your sins and there is no hope beyond the grave—if Christianity isn’t true—you might as well go get drunk. That’s what the verse says. (Don’t take that out of context.) That’s what Paul said. Let’s go to Vegas! Let’s eat and drink! So if it wasn’t true that Christ arose, then we should “eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.”

I wonder, as you look at the culture around us, why people are so into food and drink and clothes. It’s because this is all they have. They don’t have hope beyond the grave. It always has to be a new party. Gotta’ be a new thing. Gotta’ be a new fad. Live to the hilt. Gotta’ go for the gusto. Gotta’ have a good time. If you get bored with this person, find another person. It’s just constantly going and getting, because there is no hope beyond the grave.

But we as Christians have that hope. We know that this life is just the “robing room” for eternity. We’re just being prepped for eternal life. This is just a speck compared to the eternal joy that we will have with the Lord.

Jesus told the parable of the foolish farmer. He had a bumper crop and didn’t know what to do with all the produce, so he built bigger barns to store it in. He said to himself, Take your ease; eat, drink and be merry. He realized that he should just enjoy life. This is what the preacher said in Ecclesiastes: In a life without God, you might as well enjoy yourself; just live the pleasures.

But notice what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:58. This is the conclusion to the whole chapter. Paul says, “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.”

Do you believe that? If you believe that, then how do you live? Do you truly believe that there is a hope beyond the grave? Do you believe that this life is but a vapor of smoke compared to eternal life? Do you believe in eternal rewards? Then you should be influenced by what you believe—how you spend your money, how you live your life, how you raise your kids, how you conduct yourself on your job, what you think, what you say. All will be influenced by what you believe.

Someone said, “The resurrection makes strong, brave and hopeful Christians.” And the Bible teaches that we will be resurrected, we will stand before Christ and we will be rewarded for our service. So we should be “steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.”

There is a third motivation that is lost if we deny the doctrine of resurrection, in verses 33-34. It is the motivation to live holy, godly lives. Why should we live holy, godly lives, or why should we avoid sin if there is no judgment for sin? Paul says, “Do not be deceived: ‘Evil company...’”—which, I believe, is a reference to the false teachers that had corrupted their minds, teaching

that there was no resurrection of the body—"...corrupts good habits.' Awake to righteousness, and do not sin; for some do not have the knowledge of God. I speak this to your shame."

I want to unpack each phrase in these last two verses. The rejection of a future resurrection of the body had harmed these believers in six ways. In other words, their false belief affected their Christian life in these six ways.

Number one, they were being led astray. Verse 33 says, "Do not be deceived." In the Greek, it says, "Stop being deceived"; it's in the present tense. So the Corinthians were actually under the influence of these false teachers and were being deceived.

Secondly, they forgot that bad doctrine leads to bad behavior, verse 33. "Evil company corrupts good habits." The "evil company" spreading the false communications came from false teachers. When you listen to false teachers and submit to their instruction, it will have a bad effect on the way that you live. So the false communications refers to the false teachers who corrupted the way the Corinthians lived. Paul was saying that what you believe will determine how you behave. So they were being led astray, and they forgot that false teaching led them to false living.

Sometimes as a pastor I warn people that if you listen to false teaching and false doctrine—if the preaching isn't sound and Biblical—it's going to negatively affect the way that you live, think and conduct yourself. Sound doctrine will lead to sound living. It's very important.

Thirdly, they were intoxicated by worldliness. That is why Paul said to them in verse 34, "Awake to righteousness." The word "awake" has the idea of "sober up." They weren't getting drunk; they were intoxicated by the philosophies of the culture around them. Paul said in Romans 12:2, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed." Another translation says, "Do not let the world press you into its mold."

Too many Christians are thinking like the world. And because they are thinking like the world, they are behaving like the world. You need to be careful. That bad teaching and bad philosophy is causing you to be intoxicated. So sober up. They were being influenced by worldliness.

Fourthly, they were actively sinning. When Paul says, "And do not sin," it means that the Corinthians were actually living in sin; doctrinally, morally and ethnically living in sin. They believed in falsehood, so they were living in sin.

I think it's interesting that people will often reject doctrinal truth in order to accommodate sin. I can't tell you the number of times over the years that people have argued true, clear, doctrinal, Biblical truth with me. I believe that for moral reasons, they had rejected the truth. Many times people have come to me and said, "Well, it's okay if I commit adultery. It's okay if I have an adulterous affair in my marriage, because we love each other." That's not love; that's lust. That's a perverted love. That's a selfish love. The clear teaching of Scripture says that "Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers, God

will judge.”

The Bible says that we should maintain our sanctification, and we should live pure lives. But you say, “Oh, I don’t believe that.” Why is that? Because you want to accommodate your sinful behavior. You want to live in disobedience. You want to do this certain thing. You want to indulge in a particular pleasure, and you don’t want to stand true to the teaching of the Scriptures. So the Corinthians were sinning in this way.

Notice, fifthly, that they were unconcerned about the lost. Verse 34 says, “For some do not have the knowledge of God.” Why did Paul throw that in? He’s telling these messed up Corinthians that they are bad witnesses. They were forgetting about non-Christians; the non-Christians were looking at the way they were living. There were some who didn’t know the Lord; they didn’t have the knowledge of God. So when you’re on the job, in your home, in your neighborhood, remember that unbelievers are watching you.

Then sixthly and lastly, they were bringing shame to Christ and His Gospel. Verse 34 says, “I speak this to your shame.”

In other words, these were six things that were affecting the Corinthians adversely, because they didn’t believe one thing: that their bodies would be resurrected.

You see how important this doctrine is? This whole chapter is devoted to this one truth: your bodies will rise again. And you’ll have eternal life and have a new body created in the image of Jesus Christ, who “has become the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.”

So the doctrine of resurrection of the body motivates us in three areas. Let me encapsulate these three points. First of all, salvation. Because Christ rose from the dead, there is salvation, and we should preach the Gospel and baptize people in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. We should be evangelistic, because there is life beyond the grave.

Secondly, service. What else should we do with our lives? Just “eat, drink and be merry”? That’s not to say that Christians don’t eat, drink and they’re not merry. But it’s not about this life. We “seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness” and know that He’ll take care of us. So our service needs to be to the Lord. If you really believe in the resurrection of the body, it should affect the way you live. Your time, your talent and your treasure should all be devoted to eternal things.

And thirdly, sanctification. So it affects our salvation, our service and our sanctification. Why live a holy life? If there is no life beyond the grave, if there is no hope that we’ll see God, if there is no judgment for our sin, then why live a holy life? But there is a resurrection of the body, we will see God, we will stand before Him and give an account of our lives, so we want to live holy, godly lives.

Heaven is not to be just a future destination; it is to be a present motivation. When Jesus went to the Cross to die and suffer for us, the Bible says that “for the joy that was set before Him

endured the Cross...”—How?—“...despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” So He endured the Cross, despising the shame, because He had the joy that was set before Him.

So keep your eyes fixed on the prize. Keep your eyes on eternity.