

Baptism for the Dead? – 1 Corinthians 15:29-34

Introduction – This short passage is full of cryptic comments and quotations that have led to all kinds of speculations. There are many interpretations. But if we let the Bible interpret the Bible, if we read and think carefully about the Old Covenant Administration and what it was pointing to and promising, if we carefully keep track of the personal pronouns, if we remember who Paul's most violent enemies were, and why they were his enemies, there is a clearer path than one might originally think.

And if we get it right, we might find that we will think differently about things like Bucket Lists, Botox Injections...and Broken Bodies.

Where We've Been – Chapter 15, we are beginning to see, contains the teaching that is the pinnacle of all teaching; the doctrine of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and our future bodily resurrection is “*of first importance*” (v3, ESV). The death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus is the Gospel (vv1-11). If there is no resurrection from the dead (as some are teaching) then Christ is not risen and we are lost in our sins (vv12-19). But Christ is risen and is only the firstfruits of the general resurrection which will be the final display of Christ's victory over all His enemies (vv20-28).

“Otherwise” (vv29) – All died in Adam, and all in Christ shall be made alive (v22). This includes a bodily resurrection to come. Christ was the firstfruits and we will follow in order at His coming (v23). “*Otherwise,*” the argument continues, “*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?*” (v29).

Who Is Doing This? – In verse 29, “they” are baptizing for the dead and in v30 “we” are being threatened for our preaching. “They” are not the church and “we” are Paul and the apostles who preach the resurrection of Jesus and all that it means. Question: Whose practice may constitute authoritative examples for Christians, but are not Christians, and who is placing Paul in danger all the time in his missionary journeys? Answer: The unbelieving Jews.

The Jews Baptize for the Dead? – Baptism was not an unknown ordinance prior to John the Baptist, Jesus and the new Christian church. Ceremonial baptisms were prescribed for the Jews and the book of Hebrews lists some of them (Heb 9:8-10, 13-14). Ceremonial uncleanness was ceremonial death and a ceremonial washing was required in order to be made alive (clean) again (i.e. Num 19, esp. v9, 11-12). In the Old Covenant, death reigned, and death spread everywhere; death was always eating up life. In order to be permitted to rejoin the living in the assembly of God, an unclean person had to be baptized and undergo a ceremonial resurrection. This should sound very familiar to the Christian; baptism is all about death (Rom 6:3-9, Col 2:12).

Baptism “Because of” the Dead – Back in v29, we see Paul's point. The Jews baptized people who were dead, ceremonially, so that they could be “resurrected”. But why do this if there is no resurrection to which this ritual pointed? And why would Paul undergo such harsh treatment from the Jews for preaching the fulfillment of all of this in Jesus if there were no resurrection from the dead (v30)?

Paul Goes On (vv31-32) – With all of this, let me paraphrase the next two verses. If Paul has brought the message of life to the dead-Gentiles, even at the expense of the murderous acts of the Jews and Judaizers, but there is no resurrection (to which baptism points), then why bother? Death is imminent and then it's all over so party on now while we can. Notice that Paul does not even consider the possibility of life after death with no future bodily resurrection.

Awake to Righteousness (vv33-34) – Quoting a well known pagan (Menander), Paul warns that hanging out with a group who have a defective view of the resurrection corrupts good habits (if there is no resurrection, there is no reason to deny the body here). Another way to look at it is that without the hope of resurrection, we get spiritually dull and sleepy. “*Awake to righteousness and do not sin!*” is the cry. Quit acting like you don't know God, what His ceremonies pointed towards, what Christ's victorious resurrection promises, and how you should therefore live. “*I speak this to your shame.*” We should notice how forgetting resurrection and sin have gone together before (1 Cor 6:14-15).

The Horrors of Gnostic Resurrections – Do not buy into the lie that our hope is in the immortality of the soul, a Gnostic heresy. Our hope is in the resurrection of the body – and all of creation (vv35ff will handle this in greater detail). Consider...

Our Whole Person Will Be Vindicated – If we just float away from our body (maybe or maybe not into another existence) then there is no hope for broken bodies (due to the corruption of sin) to be vindicated, made whole, and glorified. But Jesus' ministry to the sick and disabled, along with His own bodily resurrection, tell us a different story. Our hope is not in release; our hope is in resurrection.

Resurrection Life to Come – Look, if we still have an eternity to live in glorified bodies on a resurrected earth, we don't have to panic to try and look like we are in our 20s as long as we can, or make sure we accomplish everything we think is important before we die. This is just the preface of volume 1 of your story as a child of our heavenly Father.

Be Wary of the "Super-Spiritual" – The "*evil company*" Paul was referring to were not the kids outside the school who smoke and watch bad movies. It was the Pharisee-law-keeping, moral-do-gooders, church-going hypocrites. The type who think their good works are worth something instead of placing their faith solely on the finished work of Jesus for their resurrection life – and, in humility, living like it. Paul had been one of those, and he despised it, turned and instead found deep satisfaction in knowing Jesus, and lived with everything pointing towards attaining the resurrection (Phil 3:7-11).

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