

1 CORINTHIANS 15:29-34

INTRODUCTION

In this section Paul is continuing to look at the subject of resurrection and the consequences of there being no resurrection. In fact in this little section Paul is looking at incentives or motivation for living for Christ. The heart of his message is that if there is no physical resurrection of people then Jesus has not been raised and if that is the case then what is the point of seeking to live for a Christ who is conquered and defeated by sin.

1. INCENTIVE FOR BAPTISM (v 29)

This is one of the most difficult verses in the bible with there being somewhere between 10-20 different interpretations of what Paul means here. No one can be dogmatic about the meaning of the verse and some of the interpretations are more likely than others. However I feel that two are most likely although both leave us with many unanswered questions.

Before we consider possible interpretations we must remember what Paul is doing here. He is arguing for a personal resurrection of believers and is highlighting the pointlessness of the Christian faith if there is no resurrection. If that is true then Christ Himself would not be raised. Sin would then not be forgiven and death and Satan would not be defeated either. Now Paul turns to what seems a bizarre practise that took place within the church at Corinth.

It might well only happened on one occasion but it seems that a group of believers within the church were being baptised in the place of believers who had died without being baptised. Now the bible nowhere teaches or commends this practise although it is believed by Mormons today, it is not however practised by any biblical church.

However it could be that it did take place within the church at Corinth and Paul is using it to show how foolish the practise is if there is no resurrection. In other words the practise enhances Paul's argument in favour of a physical resurrection of believers.

Now I am going to imagine what might have been going on in the minds of the Corinthians who were prepared to be baptised for other brothers and sisters who died without being baptised. They knew that baptism is a command from Jesus Christ and one that every believer should be willing to obey. But for some reason there were some at Corinth that had come to faith in Jesus Christ but never got baptised before their death. It could be that some well meaning and untaught Christians felt that they could be baptised for them, perhaps the deceased believers were about to be baptised but sadly death struck before it actually took place.

Now this interpretation is possible and to be honest in my view it is most likely interpretation even though the practise was wrong. However I cannot be absolutely sure that this is a correct interpretation because Paul does not condemn the practise although the language he uses ("those", "people") seems to distance Paul from the practise. But let's just say that is a correct understanding of a very difficult verse.

Paul would then be using a wrong practise to highlight his point that if there were no resurrection of the dead, why would people be bothered being baptised for others. If there were no forgiveness, then why would it matter that people should obey the Lord's words about baptism? If there were no resurrection of the dead then these deceased believers would be in hell.

But the point is that the believers who were doing this practise believed there was a resurrection that is they believed in Christ's resurrection. But Paul has already demonstrated that Christ is linked to his people so if Christ has been raised then his people will be raised because through

Christ's death and resurrection, sin has been atoned for, death has been defeated and Satan has been conquered.

Therefore Paul's conclusion is that the fact that people are being baptised for dead believers is evidence that there is a resurrection otherwise the practise is not just bizarre but also very foolish.

There is another interpretation that I think is possible and that is that some deceased believers whose testimony was so powerful that it motivated some believers within the church to be baptised and to identify with the church and with their deceased brothers and sisters in Christ.

In other words the life and testimony of some Christians was so influential that when they died it caused others to think more seriously about Christian things. In particular about baptism which is an outward sign that one is saved by grace and wants to identify with his people who are saved by grace. If this is a right interpretation then Paul's point is the same. If people were being motivated to be baptised because of the testimony of some Christians who have recently died does that not prove that there must be a resurrection of the dead? Why bother being concerned about baptism if death and hell awaits everyone.

But praise God because Christ has been raised from the dead and death and sin has been defeated and therefore because all believers are united to Christ then His resurrection assures the resurrection of all his believing people. Therefore the resurrection is an incentive and a motivation for all believers to be baptised.

Baptism is a command, it is an outward sign of inward grace and it is a public declaration that one belongs to Christ and belongs to Christ's church. It is a symbol of dying to sin and self and being raised to life with Christ. It is stating that the baptised person is in union with Christ, that they have been forgiven and justified as a result of Christ's death and resurrection.

Therefore the resurrection of Jesus is an incentive for every believer to obey Christ's command and be baptised. If you are a true Christian then you ought to obey Christ's command and be baptised and identify with Christ's church in the locality where God has placed you.

2. INCENTIVE FOR SERVICE (vs. 30-32)

The second incentive that hope of the resurrection brings is that of service for Christ. Why would believers endure and sacrifice so much unless they were certain of the resurrection. If this life were the end what would be the reason for Paul and the other Apostles being in danger every hour of the day (v 30).

If there were no resurrection of the believing dead then suffering and dying for the sake of the gospel would be suffering for suffering sake. As Paul has already pointed out in this chapter if we have hoped in Christ for this life only then we are to be pitied (v 19).

The only thing that makes Christians willing to work hard, willing to suffer and willing to be abused and ridiculed is the fact that Jesus has died for our sins and been raised again for our justification. That truth that we are redeemed and that redemption lasts way beyond this world (Romans 8:18) motivates us to give our all and to suffer in the service of God.

What would be the purpose of suffering for Christ if we would never see Him face to face? What would be the purpose of winning others to Christ if those converts would never see Christ face to face? Where would be the good news in a Saviour who could not conquer sin and death and could not give us hope beyond the grave?

What incentive would Christians have in preaching or witnessing to the gospel if that gospel gave us no future hope? What would be the point of making life miserable here on earth through hardship, sacrifices and persecution if this life is all there is? Would we not be better to eat, drink and be merry by living for ourselves and indulging our own sinful nature (v 32)?

But we thank God that Jesus Christ has died and rose again therefore guaranteeing our salvation and resurrection. This is why Paul was prepared to put himself and others in danger for the sake of the gospel. The Apostles knew that their security was in God's hands and that they had a guaranteed future to look forward to.

This is why Paul was willing to die to self every day (v 31) and put himself in difficult and dangerous situations in order to proclaim and promote the gospel. Paul stares death in the face every day and he willingly does so in order to preach this glorious gospel. To do so means that Paul has to die to his own ambitions and desires, which takes him into situations that he would not naturally go into. Paul does all that and makes such sacrifices because Jesus Christ has died and rose again therefore assuring Paul and others who trust in Christ of salvation and a future resurrection.

It is no wonder that Paul glories in the church at Corinth (v 31) for they are an example of God's resurrection power at work and the church at Corinth spares Paul on to be willing to pay the heavy price of living for Christ.

Paul gives us some more details of his willingness to risk everything for Christ (v 32). Paul it seems faced wild beasts at Ephesus and although we have no other evidence from Scripture to support this, it is likely that he did indeed face wild beasts. It could be that he is using wild beasts metaphorically to represent the wild crowd that was incited against him by the silversmith Demetrius (Acts 19:23-34).

It is clear that this occasion was one of the most dangerous and life threatening ones that Paul has ever had to face, Now what reason would Paul have for being willing to suffer if he had no hope beyond the grave and no guarantee of any sort of salvation? It is only because of the certain hope that Christ has conquered death and hell that Paul and indeed we are able to serve our Saviour and take risks in order to preach and share this gospel.

Without this certain hope then Paul's policy might as well be "eat drink for tomorrow we die" (v 32).

Now we face a challenge here. Those of us who are Christians know that Christ has died and rose again and is victorious over all his and our enemies. He grants to us salvation and is willing to grant salvation to all that seek him. But the question I ask you and myself is this. Are we willing to take risks and to pay the price that is necessary in order to serve our God and in order to proclaim this gospel?

We live in a part of the world where we know very little about suffering or about hardship for Christ. We take very few risks for Christ and live very comfortable lives as Christians. So it is hard to imagine ourselves in situations like Paul's and like so many of our brothers and sisters throughout our world. Yet even though we have to make so few sacrifices we seem far more reluctant than the persecuted church is to make them. We are often unprepared to endure a little pain for the gospel. We are not even prepared at times to face ridicule or rebuttal. There are few of us who are prepared to make sacrifices of our time, our money or our family commitments.

Few of us are willing to put ourselves out for the sake of others and when it comes to sharing the gospel and making efforts to evangelise, so few of us are willing to make the sacrifices necessary.

Let's be honest how many of us have missed a meal for the sake of Christ? How many of us have forgone a family visit for the sake of Christ? How many of us have put Jesus Christ before our spouses, children or even ourselves? How many of us have done without sleep for the sake of Christ? How many of us have faced real hardship for the sake of Christ? How many of us give up our holidays for the sake of the Christ?

Yet Paul says that the death and in particular the resurrection of Christ should be our incentive for serving Him. It should be the reason why we are prepared to make great sacrifices for Christ, put up with inconveniences, difficulties and even pain in order that we might serve the one who died for us and rose again for our justification. We are not being asked to do something that Christ has not already done for us in fact no one will ever suffer as much as Christ did. He was prepared to give up everything for us but the question is; are we willing to give up everything for Him? I trust we are and if we honestly are not willing then look again to Christ's sacrifice on that cross for us.

Think again of his resurrection and victory and thereby securing for us victory over all our enemies. Only a careful consideration of the death and resurrection of Jesus will move and motivate us to serve Him and only the cross will make us willing to make sacrifices and suffer for Him. So think again about the cross and ponder again the wonder of the resurrection.

3. AN INCENTIVE FOR HOLINESS (vs. 33-34).

Our final incentive that comes from the resurrection is for holiness. If we are looking forward to the resurrection then it should lead us to more godly living. In verses 33 Paul warns the Corinthians that they should not be misled about the danger of bad company. It seems that at least some Christians were associating with people who were a hindrance to holiness for they had a corrupting effect upon the Christians at Corinth. This bad company probably means people who denied the resurrection and therefore their lifestyle and morals were affected. For as we have seen without the resurrection all incentives for living for Christ are removed. The result was that those keeping such bad company were beginning to display some of their bad habits.

You see a disbelief in the resurrection and the consequent judgement leads to disobedience and immorality. But Paul's point is that a correct understanding and belief about the resurrection will lead to a desire for living holy and godly lives.

This is why Paul concludes this section with a wakeup call (v 34). He urges them to stop sinning by failing to believe in their own physical resurrection from the dead for it is shameful to them that some do not believe such a clear doctrine and failure to do so is affecting their lives. Now as I close it is important that we believe the right things for right belief leads to right practises.

This is why it is important that we study God's word and listen to good teaching and ask questions so that we will believe the right things and consequently live in right ways. Now a clear belief in the resurrection of Christ and in our own resurrection will help us to live holy lives. Do we want to display the glory of Christ to others as we live in our world? Do we want to bring honour to his great name? Do we long for others to come and experience Christ's resurrection power in their lives through conversion?

Of course we do and these are all reasons why we want to live pure and godly lives. Ultimately however we will stand before God and give account of our lives to him. How are we going to explain our carelessness about the things of God? The services we missed, the times we failed to study his word, the times we failed to pray or the sins that we were willing to put up with within our lives etc.

Can we explain those times when we put ourselves before others, the bad company that we were prepared to encourage and even adopt some of their beliefs and practices? The fact that we stand

before God and give account to Him is one of the greatest motivations for pursuing holy and godly lives before Him.

All of this is only true because Jesus has died and been raised again guaranteeing the fact that we who know Christ will also be raised one day and will give account of our lives to him and will live for all eternity in his presence and in his heaven,

So let us take these three incentives that flow from this central truth of the resurrection of the dead and let us seek to serve Him sacrificially and seek His grace to live holy and godly lives that He might get all the glory.

Amen