

Challenges Christians Face

What If There Is No Bodily Resurrection?

1 Corinthians 15:29-34

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What If There Is No Bodily Resurrection?

Scripture

We continue our study in *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* in a series I am calling *Challenges Christians Face*.

One of the challenges that Christians face is the issue of bodily resurrection, and particularly as it relates to how Christians live in view of our bodily resurrection. Let's learn about this in a message I am calling, "What If There Is No Bodily Resurrection?"

Let's read 1 Corinthians 15:29-34:

²⁹ Otherwise, what do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf? ³⁰ Why are we in danger every hour? ³¹ I protest, brothers, by my pride in you, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die every day! ³² What do I gain if, humanly speaking, I fought with beasts at Ephesus? If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." ³³ Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals." ³⁴ Wake up from your drunken stupor, as is right, and do not go on sinning. For some have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame. (1 Corinthians 15:29-34)

Introduction

This past week a mature Christian woman told me how she came to have saving faith in Jesus Christ. It was an interesting story, but one comment in her testimony really struck a cord with me.

She told me how she had grown up in a church-going home. As a girl she went to Sunday school and worship with her family. She heard about Jesus and the Bible, but none of that made any impact on her life.

After High School she went off to college. She attended a number of different churches. One Sunday she went to worship

with a friend. That was when she made the comment that caught my attention. She said that she was struck by the fact that *the minister actually believed the Bible*. It wasn't long before she herself came to believe in Jesus as her Lord and Savior.

Now, what was it about the way the minister spoke that made her sense that he really believed that the Bible was true? Did he shout? Did he manipulate his congregation? Did he have any special technique? I don't think so.

I am reminded of the reaction of the crowds at the conclusion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Do you remember their reaction? Matthew tells us that "when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes" (Matthew 7:28-29). Their reaction was similar to the woman who shared her testimony with me this week.

So what was the difference between the teaching of the scribes and the teaching of Jesus? The scribes spoke "from authorities," always quoting other rabbis and so-called experts of the Law. However, Jesus, as God the Son, spoke by his own authority. He did not need to quote other human authorities. His word was truth!

To the extent that Christian ministers expound God's word and not other human writers, they will be authoritative. When they really believe the Bible, they will simply explain what it says.

Part of the difficulty that Paul had with the Corinthian church is that they believed that they had progressed beyond Paul. True, Paul planted the church. They had come to believe in Jesus through the ministry of Paul. They had received forgiveness of sins through the person and work of Jesus Christ. They had grown in their understanding of God's truth through the ministry of Paul. Then Paul moved away. Some of the believers in Corinth were then led astray into believing false teaching. And this caused all kinds of problems in the church.

And so *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* was written to correct the many errors that some of the Corinthian believers had embraced.

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One of the errors that some of the Corinthian believers had embraced is that there is no bodily resurrection for Christians. Chapter 15 is Paul's teaching regarding the bodily resurrection.

In verses 1-11 Paul set down the evidence for Christ's bodily resurrection from the dead.

In verses 12-19 Paul showed that because of Christ's bodily resurrection from the dead, there *can* be a bodily resurrection for Christians.

In verses 20-28 Paul showed that because of Christ's bodily resurrection from the dead, there *must* be a bodily resurrection for Christians.

In verses 29-34, which is our text for today, Paul pointed out that it would be meaningless to live as a Christian if there was no bodily resurrection for Christians.

Lesson

So, in our lesson today we learn that it is meaningless to live as a Christian if there is no bodily resurrection for Christians.

Let's learn about this as follows:

1. If There Is No Bodily Resurrection, Baptism Is Useless (15:29)
2. If There Is No Bodily Resurrection, Ministry Is Useless (15:30-32)
3. If There Is No Bodily Resurrection, Obedience Is Useless (15:33-34)

I. If There Is No Bodily Resurrection, Baptism Is Useless (15:29)

First, if there is no bodily resurrection, baptism is useless.

Paul said in verse 29: **“Otherwise, what do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?”**

This verse is one of the most difficult to understand in the en-

tire Bible. Commentator Gordon D. Fee notes that “at least forty different solutions have been suggested” for this verse.¹

Now what is difficult for us to interpret was not apparently so for the Corinthians to whom Paul wrote. He wrote about something that they mutually understood and so he did not elaborate, which is why it is so hard for us to understand what Paul means.

The reason this verse is so difficult to interpret is that there is no passage in all of Scripture that describes a baptism on behalf of the dead. Furthermore, Paul does not condemn the practice. Instead he pointed to the absurdity of believing that there would be no resurrection of believers in light of the practice of **being baptized on behalf of the dead**. Frankly, **if the dead are not raised at all**, then there is no reason to be **baptized in their behalf**.

Perhaps the most likely explanation is that Paul did not approve of the practice of **being baptized on behalf of the dead**. Commentator Richard Pratt points out that Paul referred to the practitioners in the third person (**people**) rather than in the first (“we”) or second person (“you”), probably avoiding close association with them.²

If this is the correct understanding of this verse, then Paul pointed out the inconsistency between their practice and their denial of a bodily resurrection for Christians. He asked what sense it would make for people to deny the bodily resurrection of Christians while practicing vicarious baptism for the dead.

The Mormon Church does, of course, practice baptism on behalf of the dead. However, this heretical practice is not supported anywhere in all of Scripture.

Now, baptism is a symbol of our union with Christ in his death and resurrection. That is why Paul said in Romans 6:3-5: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried there-

¹ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 762.

² Richard L. Pratt, Jr, vol. 7, *I & II Corinthians*, Holman New Testament Commentary; Holman Reference (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 266.

fore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”

Paul’s point is that if baptism did not symbolize resurrection, then why did they practice it? Of course, Paul did not approve baptism on behalf of someone else. But, he did imply that baptism is useless if there is no resurrection from the dead.

So, if there is no bodily resurrection, baptism is useless.

II. If There Is No Bodily Resurrection, Ministry Is Useless (15:30-32)

Second, if there is no bodily resurrection, ministry is useless.

Paul appealed to the sacrifices that he and the other Christian leaders made for the sake of ministry because of their profound conviction of a future bodily resurrection for Christians. He asked in verse 30a: **“Why are we in danger every hour?”** Those who were active in ministry did so at great personal cost. They were imprisoned, beaten, stoned, and even murdered. Do you remember how Paul put it in his second letter to the Corinthians?

Speaking of false servants of Christ, Paul said in 2 Corinthians 11:23-28:

Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other

things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

That is why Paul said at the end of verse 31, **“I die every day!”**

Paul next referred the Corinthians to an event about which they knew. He said in verse 32a: **“What do I gain if, humanly speaking, I fought with beasts at Ephesus?”** Acts 19:1-20:1 records Paul’s difficulties during his three-year stay in Ephesus. He faced significant difficulties there. Most likely, however, Paul did not actually face **beasts at Ephesus**. Paul was a Roman citizen, and no Roman citizen was to be thrown to wild **beasts** for his own punishment (and the entertainment of the community). More likely, Paul was speaking figuratively about those who violently opposed him as **beasts**.

Whatever Paul specifically had in mind, he made it clear that he would never have endured such difficulties if only for merely human reasons—without the certainty of a future bodily resurrection in mind. He would not have gained anything if he had endured great personal suffering if there was no such thing as a bodily resurrection for Christians.

If it were true that **the dead are not raised**, then Paul would not have lived such a difficult life. Instead, he would have embraced the philosophy that was common in that day (and, frankly, is common in our day too), **“Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die”** (15:32b).

Paul was quoting Isaiah 22:13b, which says, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.” Isaiah was rebuking his listeners for not taking the warnings of divine judgment seriously.

Similarly, Paul said that irresponsible sensual revelry would be the only reasonable approach to life—if there was no bodily resurrection for Christians.

The Greek historian Herodotus tells of an interesting custom of the Egyptians. He said:

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In social meetings among the rich, when the banquet was ended, a servant would often carry around among the guests a coffin, in which was a wooden image of a corpse carved and painted to resemble a dead person as nearly as possible. The servant would show it to each of the guests and would say; “Gaze here and drink and be merry, for when you die such you shall be.”³

If this life is all there is, then why not do whatever you want to do? Why not grab all you can get, do all you can, and live it up? If you die only to remain dead, hedonism makes perfect sense.

What would *not* make sense is the sacrificial ministry of those “who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, . . . wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth” (Hebrews 11:33-34, 38). Their hope that “that they might rise again to a better life” (Hebrews 11:35) would have been futile and empty.

Paul appealed to the Corinthians to consider his own life as a strong evidence that he really believed God’s word. The future bodily resurrection for Christians was one factor that motivated him in his ministry. It would be absolutely absurd to serve as hard as he did, and to go through all the suffering that he did, if there was no certainty of a future bodily resurrection for Christians.

So, first, if there is no bodily resurrection, baptism is useless. Second, if there is no bodily resurrection, ministry is useless.

III. If There Is No Bodily Resurrection, Obedience Is Useless (15:33-34)

And third, if there is no bodily resurrection, obedience is useless.

Paul closed this section of the discussion with a stern warning. He worried that those who denied a bodily resurrection for Christians would corrupt sincere Christian believers. So he said in

³ John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 428.

verse 33: **“Do not be deceived: ‘Bad company ruins good morals.’”**

This quotation was actually a well-known proverb in Paul’s day, even as it is in our own day. It was found in Manander’s *Thais*.

The Corinthian Christians associated with people who scoffed at the notion a future bodily resurrection for Christians, and Paul wanted them to break off these associations. He did not want them to **be deceived**. These associates probably advocated Greek philosophy, not only denying a bodily resurrection, but also influencing some of the Corinthians to pursue worldly wisdom.

So, Paul sternly said in verse 34a: **“Wake up from your drunken stupor, as is right, and do not go on sinning.”** Paul said that a wrong view of the resurrection was sin. He wanted the Corinthian Christians to correct their misunderstanding of the resurrection. He wanted them to understand that Jesus really did rise again from the dead. And he wanted them to understand that because of Christ’s bodily resurrection from the dead, there can and must be a bodily resurrection for Christians as well.

The reason that **some** deny the resurrection of Christ and of Christians is because they **have no knowledge of God** (15:34b).

Paul said all of **this to their shame**.

One application for us is that we must be very careful with whom we associate. Obviously, God has left us in the world in order to be salt and light. We are to influence our community and culture for Christ and the gospel.

However, too often it is exactly the opposite and we are influenced by the culture. For example, our culture says that homosexuality is not a choice. Our culture says that homosexuality is no more a choice than is the choice of our skin color. In 2007 the Pew Global Attitudes asked the question, “Should homosexuality be accepted by society?” Forty-nine percent of the respondents in the United States said that homosexuality should be accepted by society, whereas forty-one percent said that it should not be accepted by

society.⁴ Now, I don't know what the statistics would be for Christians, but I will guarantee that acceptance of homosexual behavior is growing by Christians. And that is largely because Christians are being deceived. Many Christians do not study God's word. And so, instead of basing their views on the Bible, they base their views on what our culture teaches.

Paul's point in this section is that belief in a bodily resurrection produces obedience. We have a great hope that one day we will be with God for all eternity. We know that our mortal bodies will die, but when Jesus returns our spirits will be reunited with our bodies. From that point on our bodies will be immortal. And that future hope is a motivation to our current obedience.

So, first, if there is no bodily resurrection, baptism is useless. Second, if there is no bodily resurrection, ministry is useless. And third, if there is no bodily resurrection, obedience is useless.

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, let us embrace what Paul teaches us in his letter to the Corinthians.

Jesus really did rise from the dead three days after he was buried in the tomb. He was seen by many different groups of people who testified that they had seen him alive. The evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is irrefutable.

Because Jesus has been resurrected from the dead, we can be certain that we too are going to experience a bodily resurrection. When we die our bodies will be put to rest in the ground. Our spirits will go immediately to heaven where we will be with God. At some future point, Jesus will return to earth. All Christians alive at that time will not die but will be translated to heaven, in much the same way Enoch and Elijah were. All Christians who have died and whose spirits are in heaven will be reunited with their bodies. These bodies will be glorified bodies, much like the body of Jesus

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Societal_attitudes_toward_homosexuality.

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after his resurrection. Then God will judge his enemies and destroy the last enemy—death. And Christians will be with God for all eternity.

In view of this glorious hope, let us remember our baptism, serve in ministry, and walk in obedience to our wonderful Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAYER:

Our Father, thank you for the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thank you that his resurrection guarantees our own resurrection. Thank you that his resurrection guarantees the destruction of the evil powers and authorities. Thank you that his resurrection guarantees that he will hand over the kingdom to his Father. And thank you that his resurrection motivates our present service.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve the risen Jesus Christ!