



A Life Worth Living

No. 38

1 Corinthians 15:29-34

Series: 1 Corinthians

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Text

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? Why are we in danger every hour? I protest, brothers, by my pride in you, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die every day! 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." Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals." 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.

Intro:

- Arouse interest:
 - Among all of the classic missionary heroes of the faith, my favorite missionary is Adoniram Judson. Adoniram Judson was a New England Congregationalist who became a convictional Baptist and served in Burma as a missionary for 38 years.
 - During this time, Burma was considered to be a hostile field. John Piper writes, "[Burma] probably would have been considered a closed country today—with anarchic despotism, fierce war with Siam, enemy raids, constant rebellion, no religious toleration. All the previous missionaries had died or left."¹
 - Prior to setting sail, Judson would fall in love with Ann Hasseltine. He was 24. She was 23. When asking for her hand in marriage, Judson wrote to her father, declaring his intent to be her husband, while also being clear about what her life would look like on a foreign mission field.
 - Judson wrote:
 - "I have now to ask, whether you can consent to part with your daughter early next spring, to see her no more in this world;

¹ John Piper, "How Few There Are Who Die So Hard!," *Desiring God*, 4 February 2003, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/how-few-there-are-who-die-so-hardHasselt,ine>.

whether you can consent to her departure, and her subjection to the hardships and sufferings of missionary life; whether you can consent to her exposure to the dangers of the ocean, to the fatal influence of the southern climate of India; to every kind of want and distress; to degradation, insult, persecution, and perhaps a violent death. Can you consent to all this, for the sake of him who left his heavenly home, and died for her and for you; for the sake of perishing, immortal souls; for the sake of Zion, and the glory of God? Can you consent to all this, in hope of soon meeting your daughter in the world of glory, with the crown of righteous, brightened with the acclamations of praise which shall redound to her Savior from heathens saved, through her means, from eternal woe and despair?"²

- Surface Need:
 - People back then were made of sterner stuff than we are today. If you were a mother or father back then, and you received a letter like this, what would you say?
 - Would you think that the cause of Christ is worth suffering for, worth dying for? Do you think that the spread of the gospel to those who are lost and condemned to hell is worth not just your life, but the lives of your sons and daughters on the mission field?
 - Is Jesus Christ really worthy of our all? Or did Adoniram Judson waste his life and the lives of his family?

- Orient to Text:
 - Throughout 1 Corinthians 15, the Apostle Paul has been walking us through the various implications of Christ's resurrection. In verses 1-7, Paul reminded God's people of the things of first importance. The basics of the gospel.
 - [T]hat Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures (1 Cor. 15:3-5).
 - Paul then shows his receipts to demonstrate that the resurrection is not an existential metaphor, it is a fact of history. As he shows in verses 5 through 7, there are people still alive at the time Paul wrote this who saw Jesus after he was raised from the dead. The Corinthians could have just gone and asked them to see for themselves whether it was true.

² Piper, "How Few There Are Who Die So Hard!"

- After presenting the objective evidence for Christ’s resurrection, Paul then turns to reflect on the implications of the resurrection for today.
 - If Jesus really rose from the dead, then that means that sin is no longer the defining factor of my life. There is such a thing as forgiveness and grace today.
 - If Jesus really rose from the dead, then that means that death is not the end, and there is hope in this life because Jesus Christ is Lord. And he will reign until he puts all his enemies under his feet.

- And now we get to our passage today in verses 29-32. Here, Paul is raising another implication of the resurrection of Christ for our lives. According to Paul, if the resurrection is true, then that means that the things that we do for the sake of Christ are things that are actually worth doing. They’re sacrifices that are worth the price.
- In short, Paul is going to argue here on the basis of Christ’s resurrection that *the Christian life is a life worth living*.

Is It Worth It? (29-32)

- So what makes the sacrifice of the Christian life worthwhile? Well again, according to Paul, if the resurrection didn’t happen, then pretty much nothing we do as Christians would really be worth doing at all. Look with me at our passage starting at verse 29:
 - [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.”

- Now, right off the bat, we need to deal with this very tricky issue in verse 29. What is the baptism for the dead? Full transparency, I’m not certain what this means. Gordon Fee has this great line in his commentary that if you have a passage like this with well over 40 different hypothetical interpretations, it’s probably because no one is really that confident about what this passage actually means.³
- Having said this, we can generally categorize these various interpretations under four different headings. Four different families of interpretation. And from there, we can at least rule out interpretations that simply can’t be true.

³ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Eerdmans, 2014).

- Mormons take this passage to refer to an actual vicarious baptism that is performed on behalf of someone who has already died. Essentially, the idea is that if you have a family member who died without coming to faith, you yourself can be baptized in place of them, and in the afterlife, that family member can then have the option of receiving the efficacy of that baptism for themselves. They can be saved in this manner even though they themselves never received Christ in this life.

Now, there are a number of significant issues with this interpretation of this text. In the first place, as we've already said, no one is really sure what this baptism for the dead really means to the original Corinthian church. And these are incredibly bold and controversial claims to make on the basis of such an ambiguous passage.

- But more importantly, the Bible is pretty clear that there is no such thing as a second chance for salvation after death.
 - Hebrews 9:27 states:
 - [27] And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment,
 - In his account of Lazarus and the rich man, Jesus states in Luke 16:26 that between heaven and hell lies an infinite chasm so that no man can pass from one place to the other.
 - Furthermore, even if those condemned to hell have the opportunity to repent and be saved, the picture that we are given of those in hell is that they wouldn't be open to taking that deal.
 - Many today, when they hear the phrase weeping and gnashing of teeth in Matthew 13:41, think that this is a reference to the suffering and anguish of the damned. And this is true, but this isn't the complete picture. The phrase gnashing of teeth is also used in Acts 6:54, where the Pharisees ground their teeth in rage at Stephen.
 - And this suggests that those in hell are not looking for a second chance to repent and return to God. No, the imagery is that they hate God. They've been given over to their sin, and they persist in their rebellion for all eternity.

Application

- This is something important for all of us to note this morning. If you are convicted of sin today, if you need to get right with the Lord, if you know you need Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, then don't wait to get right with God. Get right with the Lord today. Friend, you're not promised tomorrow. And when you're dead, you're dead, and there is no provision for a second chance after death.

Explanation

- So I think we can safely lay aside that interpretive option for today. What about the others?
- Well, some would argue that what Paul is referring to here is simply ordinary baptism. Paul himself describes baptism in Romans 6 as being buried with Christ in death and being raised to newness of life in his resurrection. So this could just be a reference to baptism.
- Personally, I don't find this option very convincing. The wording in the Greek behind this passage is the same prepositional construct we first see in verse 3, where Christ is said to die for our sins. So it seems to me that there is some kind of vicarious substitutionary sense behind whatever this baptism is.
- This leaves us with the last two kinds of interpretation of this passage. One is that this is a reference to the washing of the dead bodies of the saints, the preparation of their bodies for burial. This interpretation has the strength of fitting nicely with Paul's larger aim. Remember, Paul is trying to show how many of the practices Christians keep wouldn't make sense if there is no such thing as a future resurrection. And if this interpretation is right, then Paul is saying here that it doesn't make sense for us to prep the bodies of the dead if we don't believe that this same body will one day rise again from the grave.
- I think this is a very strong interpretation. But out of all the options, my own preference is for this last one. That what it means to be baptized for the dead is really a reference to how new believers who are baptized into the church are in some sense taking the place of the martyrs who died for their witness to the faith. The idea is that when you are baptized, you are signing up to lay down your life for the cause of Christ, just like so many other Christians in the past laid down their lives for the sake of Christ as well.⁴
- And this seems to fit well with Paul's rhetorical logic here in verses 29-32. If this is right, then what Paul is arguing here is that if Jesus didn't rise again from the grave and if there is no such thing as a future resurrection for believers to look forward to, then all those martyrs who died bearing witness to the lordship of Christ died in vain. That those who sign up to do the same thing with their lives are really just throwing their lives away.
- Paul then turns to look at himself in verse 30. He brings up all the suffering, all the anguish, all the sacrifices he went through to preach the gospel to those who were lost, and he asks the hard questions here. Is my life work in vain? Are the sacrifices of my ministry to reach others for Christ, to reach the Corinthians for Christ, is all of that for nothing?

⁴ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007).

- The Apostle Paul was no stranger to suffering. We're not exactly sure what the event is that Paul is referring to at Ephesus in verse 32, but the imagery of Paul fighting with beasts is a common metaphor for those who strenuously struggle against a host of enemies. And Paul had a lot of enemies. He suffered immense persecution and tribulation for the sake of his gospel witness.
- In 2 Corinthians 11:23-29, Paul lists some of the trials he went through for the sake of Christ.
 - 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.
- Friends, this is a man who had skin in the game. A man who has gone all in for the sake of Jesus Christ and for the salvation of his people. But according to Paul, if Jesus Christ did not rise again from the dead, this would all have been for nothing. What earthly gain did Paul possibly receive for being sold out to a Savior who didn't rise from the dead?

Application

- This is something we need to contend with this morning. For those of you who are here visiting us today, who are not sure what you think about this Jesus person this morning, friend, you need to know that one of the fundamental aims of my preaching this morning is that you would be persuaded that Jesus Christ is Lord. That you would be convinced that he really did rise from the dead, and that forgiveness for your sins is truly there to be received for all who repent and trust in Christ this morning. That the unconditional love of Christ is available to anyone who would come to him.
- But at the same time, I don't want you to be deceived about what it means to trust and follow Jesus today. Yes, Jesus loves you. But in his love, he calls you to lay down your life in service to him. Yes, Jesus died for you. But in doing so, Jesus also now calls everyone here to take up your cross and follow him (Matt. 16:24).

- And he very well may lead any one of us to serve in a hard mission field one day. But even if you never go abroad, every Christian is called to, in some ways, die to ourselves so that we might live for Christ.
- Jesus may call you to sacrifice a relationship. Not because you don't love the person, but because real love means bearing faithful witness to the kingdom of God even when others don't like you.
- He may call you to sacrifice some comforts of this world in order that you may obtain the comforts of heaven.
- Friends, make no mistake about this. The Christian life is a good life, but it is by no means a life of ease.
- This is why, at times, I get frustrated with various figures today who seek to preserve the morality of the Christian faith while stripping it of its miraculous content. Because if you take away heaven and hell, if you take away life after death, if you take away the resurrection of Jesus Christ, then what good reason could any of us possibly have for taking the teachings of Jesus seriously? What human reason could any of us possibly have for laying down our lives in order to live fully for Jesus Christ?
- In the words of Paul in verse 32:
 - If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."
- But friends, what if it's real? What if Jesus Christ really did get up from the grave? What if there really is such a thing as life after death? Wouldn't that mean that you and I would have to rethink everything we thought we once knew?
- If Jesus really did rise from the dead, then that means that there is a God. There is a God that we ought to obey, and we don't.
- If Jesus really did rise from the dead, then that means that this God loves us more than we could ever imagine, because this God came down to live as a man. To live, die, and rise again from the dead so that the penalty for our sins could be covered by his death, and the assurance of our hope can be seen in his resurrection.
- Friends, if Jesus really did rise from the dead, then that means that Jesus Christ is Lord. That means that his promise to one day return to judge the living and the dead is true. And that means that the things that we do for Christ today are things that are worth doing.
- It is worth it to go to the hard places and tell people about Jesus so that they, too, have the chance to trust in a great Savior and to be saved from the condemnation of hell.
- It's worth putting down the deeds of the flesh so that we, too, might live in the freedom and power of Christ's resurrection.

- It's even worth suffering for Jesus today because we know that the sufferings of this life won't even be worth comparing to the glory that we will receive in heaven when we are reunited with him (Rom. 8:18).
- Friends, if Jesus Christ truly rose from the dead, then the Christian life truly is a life worth living. And if you're here today, and you're wondering whether or not any of this stuff is real, please don't leave here today without talking to a member of our church about why we believe the things we do. Check out the other sermons we've been doing on 1 Corinthians, where we go into more detail on why we believe that the resurrection of Christ is true and what the implications of his resurrection are for our lives today. But don't wait to figure out what you are going to do with Jesus. Get to know Jesus today before it is too late, and you lose your chance.

Why Don't We Act Like It's Worth It? (32-34)

- Now, for those of us who are Christians here today, who claim to believe this stuff, there is a problem for us today. We believe that Jesus rose from the dead. We believe that the Christian life, despite its many hardships, is truly a life worth living.
- But if we believe these radical things, why do our lives so often look no different than the lives of those who don't believe in Jesus today? Why is it that you and I are spending our time, money, and talents on the same things that everyone else is?
- The Apostle Paul does something really interesting here at the end of verse 32. He kind of plays with a double meaning here.⁵ On the one hand, this is exactly the kind of thing a pagan Epicurean of the time would say when thinking about the meaning of life in a godless world. If there is no resurrection, you might as well throw a party before you die.
- But on the other hand, the wording here is a direct quote of Isaiah 22:13. And this passage takes on a whole different perspective in light of that context. Because in Isaiah, the Lord is warning the people of Jerusalem that he is coming in judgment. That he is sending a foreign army to judge his people for their sins.
- But rather than repent of their sins and ask the Lord for mercy, these people forget about God entirely. They decide to throw a party in light of their impending doom, and it's foolish. It's foolish because of all the people in the world, these are the people who should have known better.
- And Paul takes that context and applies it to Christians like us. Christians who claim to believe in Jesus but live as if he doesn't exist.

Application

⁵ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*.

- Beloved, we need to wrestle with this. If you are a Christian today, it makes sense for us to go hard after Jesus. It makes sense to go all out in our service to him.
- And if you are an unbeliever today, in a twisted way, it does actually make sense for you to live recklessly in this life knowing you've only got this one life to live before it's gone.
- But what doesn't make any sense at all is for you to claim to believe in Jesus, to believe that Jesus lived, died, and rose again from the dead, to believe that he will one day return in judgment, and to still live recklessly with your life. That's just dumb. It's dumb because one day you and I are going to stand before the Lord. And it is going to be very clear to him that you and I ought to have known better, but we sure didn't act better.

Explanation

- And according to Paul, the reason why so many Christians today are comfortable living as if Jesus Christ didn't actually rise from the dead is because so many of us aren't careful enough with our particular choice of friends. Look with me again at verse 33:
 - Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals." 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.
- Now, I want to be careful how I say this. I am not saying that you cannot have unbelievers as friends. Generally, I think it is a good thing for Christians not to be entirely enclosed within a Christian bubble.
- I am not even saying that you can't learn some good and true things from your unbelieving friends. There are times when your unbelieving friends may even show you up in their conduct and character. So I'm not saying you can't learn from them.
- But what I am saying is that if all your beliefs, all your values, all your opinions, all the trajectories of your life are being shaped by people who don't believe in God, then inevitably you will start to live a life that is antithetical to the gospel you claim to preach.
- Friends, there is a reason why the Psalmist tells God's people in Psalm 1:
 - Blessed is the man
 - who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
 - nor stands in the way of sinners,
 - nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
 - but his delight is in the law of the LORD,
 - and on his law he meditates day and night.

- Brothers and sisters, this is also why you and I need to be somewhat discerning about the media we consume on a daily basis. Again, I'm not saying that it's bad to watch a movie or listen to secular music. But if all the music, movies, and podcasts we listen to are coming from unbelievers, inevitably, these things are going to have an effect on our lives.
 - They're gonna shape us into trusting money more than we trust in God.
 - They're gonna shape us to rest in comfort more than we rest in Christ.
 - They're gonna shape us to be more inclined to live our lives for ourselves rather than to lay down our lives for Christ.

- This is also one of the reasons why, here at IBC, we stress that the church is not simply an option for believers. It is an essential aspect of our salvation. You need the church family to truly live the Christian life. To remind yourself of why the Christian life is worth living in the first place.
- When you've been saturated in the priorities of this world six days out of the week, the Sunday morning gathering of God's people is far more important than you think. It's a touchpoint in your week to remind you of what is real.
- When we gather together, and we sing the songs that we sing, we rehearse the liturgy of our gospel, we listen to the preached Word of God together, you and I are reminding ourselves and our spiritual family that Jesus Christ is real. That we really have been adopted as children of God. That the Holy Spirit really is at work in our lives, empowering us to do great things for God.
- And in remembering what's true, you and I are once again reminded that a life wholeheartedly sold out to his service truly is a great life, because it is a life dedicated to the one Lord who truly is worthy of all our love and adoration. Do you believe that this morning?
- Friends, we need to be careful about the people we allow to influence our faith and conduct this morning. We need to be careful not only for the sake of our own souls but also for the sake of the vast millions of people around the world who, as Paul says in verse 34, have no knowledge of God.
- We need to remember that our job in this life isn't simply to blend in with the world until Jesus comes to beam us up to heaven. No, our job is to have the hard conversations. To go to the hard places to bear faithful witness to the good news of Christ's resurrection. Our job is to lay down our lives for the sake of Christ and his gospel, and to do so because Jesus Christ first laid down his life for the sake of us and our salvation.

Conclusion

- That's the kind of life Christians are called to live today. That's the kind of life Adoniram Judson and Ann Hasseltine endeavored to live for the Lord during their time in Burma.
- And it cost them dearly. After Adoniram and Ann left for Burma, Adoniram would never again see his mother, father, or brother. During a time when Adoniram was imprisoned under suspicion of being a foreign spy, Ann was pregnant. She fell ill after the child was born, and both Ann and their new daughter Maria died on the mission field. Judson himself would serve in Burma for 48 years until he died at sea, traveling to the Isle of France for medical aid.⁶
- Was it worth it? Did the sufferings of their life mean anything? Maybe we aren't the right people to answer this kind of question. Currently, the evangelical Christians in Myanmar make up only 5% of the population, and they suffer under immense persecution. But the majority of those evangelical Christians come from the Myanmar Baptist Convention, the very convention that Adoniram Judson founded in 1813.⁷
- Maybe we should ask them whether or not the Judsons' sacrifice was worth it. Maybe they can do a better job explaining to us today how valuable the life of Adoniram Judson was in giving them a chance to hear about the love of Christ for themselves. Maybe they can do a better job persuading Christians like us that a life sold out for Jesus Christ in radical ways truly is a life worth living.

⁶ Piper, "How Few There Are Who Die So Hard!"

⁷ "Myanmar Baptist Convention | World Council of Churches," 1 January 1957, <https://www.oikoumene.org/member-churches/myanmar-baptist-convention>.