

“If the dead are not raised” is used twice in these 5 verses, showing us that Paul has returned to his rhetorical argument meant to show the Corinthians that rejecting the hope of resurrection from the dead and maintaining the value of Christian service, rites, and suffering for the sake of the gospel is ludicrous.

We noted two weeks ago that denying the reality of our own resurrection from the dead has certain implications, some of which are that it means Jesus wasn't raised from the dead and you are still in your sins. Here, Paul returns to three more implications of such a denial, but he moves from the theological gospel implications to an ad hominem argument, a personal argument from personal experience, to show that certain acts with which they were familiar, whether performed by others or by the apostles, made no sense unless there is a resurrection.

1. It is Absurd for Your Faith and Practice to be Inconsistent

a. Why do people do this strange practice of being baptized for the dead, if the dead are not raised up to life?

- i. There are over 40 different interpretations of what this phrase “those being baptized for the dead” might mean.
 1. Some try to alter the definitions of “baptize” and make it a metaphor, similar to elsewhere in the Scriptures
 - a. Romans 6:3-4
 - b. Galatians 2:20
 - c. Yet, these metaphorical usages are surrounded by a context and particulars which call for such a usage, but not so here
 2. Some try to alter to whom “the dead” refer, again making it a metaphor for spiritual death
 - a. Yet, this would be a huge departure from what “the dead” refer to in Paul's immediate argument regarding resurrection
 - b. “The dead” in chapter 15 always refer to the people who have died, or fallen asleep, and is not metaphorical at all
 3. Some try to alter what ‘for’ or ‘on behalf of’ means
 - a. But you cannot simply change the meaning of a preposition because it doesn't fit your presumptions
 - b. “For” (ὕπέρ) always has ‘in place of’ or ‘on behalf of’ in its meaning
 4. Usually, the reason for such confusion is that we are trying to avoid the plain meaning of the text because it seems to be at theological odds with what we know of baptism, of grace, of the gospel, and that Paul does not admonish it here
- ii. There appears to be some kind of vicarious baptism going on which the Corinthians would be familiar with
 1. People were being baptized on behalf of those who had died
 - a. First, there is no indication that Paul approved of this practice, yet it does not appear that whatever it was it was as troublesome to him as denying the physical resurrection of the body
 - b. Secondly, whatever it means, and there is uncertainty, we do know what it cannot mean:
 - i. It cannot be any kind of salvific baptism, or baptismal regeneration
 1. That is, the rite of baptism doesn't justify anyone
 - a. If baptism doesn't make the one being baptized right with God, then it surely cannot do so via proxy
 - b. I think that this erroneous belief is why the custom has been practiced by the Mormons
 - i. They believe is salvation by works

- ii. They want their dead loved ones to be saved, so they work for them in this way
 - 2. However, the Mormon practice of being baptized for dead relatives, etc. is NOT what is mentioned here
 - a. Paul would have anathematized such a practice on the basis of Galatians: the righteous are justified by faith, not by works.
 - b. Eph 2:8-9 – salvation is by grace through faith and not as a result of works
 - 3. If this were the purpose, you know that Paul would have condemned it outright, or else he would be inconsistent, which is opposed to his own argument of consistency here
- ii. It cannot mean that there was any spiritual or eternal benefit gained by the one who had died because of this vicarious baptism
 - 1. Hebrews 9:27
 - 2. The only benefits received vicariously are those which are obtained by being united to Christ Jesus by faith in Him
 - 3. Thus, praying for the dead is also something which makes no sense – no candles lit, no extreme unction, no novena of Jude will help one into eternal rest in heaven
- iii. It cannot mean that Paul *necessarily* approves of such a ritual
 - 1. He speaks in chapter 8 of eating in the temples of false gods without denouncing it, either, so that he might prove the point of doing what edifies one another
 - 2. Later, however, in chapter 10, he does condemn it, though not in the immediate argument
 - 3. This just goes to show that simply because a writer uses an example, or an analogy that is known by his readers does not imply an approval of such an example morally
- iii. Here's my best shot at understand this vicarious baptism:
 - 1. First, this letter was written very early in the life of the church, and particularly the life of the Gentile church (~52-55AD)
 - 2. Second, I assume that there were believers in Jesus who were not baptized into the life of the church before they died
 - a. We see this confusion at Ephesus, where Paul preached, people believed, and then Paul moved on.
 - b. When he returned to Ephesus, he questioned them about baptism, but they were only familiar with the baptism of John, and thus they were baptized in the name of Jesus
 - c. This goes to show that even though people believed at the outset, many were not baptized immediately
 - 3. Third, the Corinthians clearly had an issue with power/honor, which Paul corrects throughout the letter, but particularly early on in his writing
 - a. They were not seeking eternal benefits or salvation, but earthly honor, even if future
 - 4. Therefore, I believe that there were those who wanted their dearly loved family members who had believed in Jesus but had not been baptized, to be fully honored in the life of the church, and therefore were being baptized in their names, that is on their behalf
 - a. It is a bit similar to a man wanting his grandfather's name on a plaque in the foyer as an original member of a local church, etc.

- b. Therefore, it's not good, per say, but neither is it as egregious as denying the resurrection of the dead
 - b. We have such rituals, too, which imply great honor for dead bodies because of the hope of resurrection
 - i. Have you ever stopped to wonder why we spend so much money on the burial of the dead?
 - ii. It is because our traditions are built upon the hope of resurrection, and though many don't believe in the resurrection any longer, the traditions remain *inconsistent with the current worldview*
 - 1. Thus, I believe that Paul would have asked a similar question regarding our burial customs
 - 2. This is why, and it is not a moral issue, please understand, that I won't cremate my loved ones – because I believe that interment burial better proclaims my hope of resurrection
 - a. Now, God can raise ashes, I understand. But what does it proclaim about the hope of physical resurrection?
 - c. The reality is that we simply do not know with certainty what the particulars of such a practice were, but it doesn't matter because we can still follow Paul's argument with certainty
 - i. Paul clearly does not tackle the issue because it's not important for his argument
 - 1. First, he uses the 3rd person pronoun "They" and not the 2nd person pronoun "you"
 - a. This tells me that he is distinguishing, and not including, those who practice these things from the Corinthian church
 - 2. Secondly, to go on a diatribe to condemn such a practice would actually detract from his main argument regarding the necessity of believing in the resurrection from the dead
 - a. This is my primary observation of why the practice may be condemnable, but not admonished here
 - b. Thus, we should not build any doctrines or practices around this verse as something which ought to be imitated
 - ii. Whatever the practice was, because it was concerning the dead and baptism, which symbolized being raised up from the dead, it makes no sense to deny the resurrection
 - iii. Therefore, the very practice of such baptism proclaimed a belief in the resurrection – so how could they deny it?
 - iv. Thus, his argument remains to show the inconsistencies with such a practice and a denial of our future resurrection.

2. It is Absurd to Suffer So Greatly for the Gospel if There is No Resurrection

- a. He now uses his own choices and experiences to argue for the inconsistency of denying the resurrection of the dead
 - i. Now he changes to the 1st person pronouns, "we" and "I"
 - ii. Paul was not baptizing for the dead, notice
- b. He was enduring persecution daily, which makes no sense if there is no resurrection
 - i. If there is no future life, then the Christian life with all its costs, sufferings, and denials of earthly pleasures is simply stupid
 - 1. If you take the resurrection away from him, then why is he going through the threats of death, of horrible, brutal, excruciating sufferings?
 - a. What is the point of enduring present danger if there is no future delight?
 - b. What is the point of the self-denying life of the gospel if there is no future glory?
 - c. It is all "futile" if there is no resurrection
 - 2. Try telling our brothers and sisters in Iraq, Syria, North Korea, Myanmar, and Libya that there is no resurrection and that this life is all that there is

- a. How many would remain faithful to Christ unto death? Nobody, if there is no resurrection!
- ii. In fact, the gospel ministry is so difficult for Paul that he describes it in the utmost horrific terms:
 - 1. Fighting with wild beasts in Ephesus
 - a. Could be literal, although as a Roman citizen it would be unallowable (yet, he was abused as a citizen until he made it clear he was one in Acts 22)
 - b. Could be metaphorical for argument's sake, referring to Demetrius and his mob at Ephesus as "wild beasts" (Acts 19)
 - c. Either way, death was before them, beatings endured by them
 - 2. "I die daily, as is held by your boasting"
 - a. That is, they boast of Paul's sufferings! They honor his vigilance, his perseverance, his passion
 - i. This honor and boasting makes no sense if there is no hope or purpose in his sufferings, which there wouldn't be if there is no resurrection
 - b. Clearly this is metaphorical, but is used hyperbolically for argument's sake
 - i. "Every day I am condemned to die! And what's the point of going through all of this if there is no hope beyond such a death?"
 - 3. The resurrection from the dead was the hope which kept Paul going under intense persecution
 - a. 2 Corinthians 1:8-9
 - b. There were times when the gospel ministers despaired of life itself.
 - i. This is a faithful Christian, sold out to Christ, who is acknowledging the despair which they sometimes felt in the midst of their sufferings
 - ii. He is not feigning joy all the time.
 - c. Yet, these sufferings pushed him towards the hope promised by God which they learned through their sufferings to cling
 - i. "Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead." (2 Cor. 1:9 ESV)
 - 4. The reason for our sufferings is so that we will learn to rely not on ourselves, but on God *who raises the dead*.
 - a. 2 Cor 1:10
 - i. He delivered us from such a great death (PAST)
 - ii. He will deliver us (FUTURE)
 - iii. We have placed our hope that he will deliver us (HOPE)
- c. If there is no resurrection, then we might as well await our doom of death by nihilistic frivolity
 - i. Quotes Isaiah 22:13
 - ii. If there is no resurrection, the nihilists and self-seekers are the most consistent
 - 1. "Resurrection means endless hope, but no resurrection means a hopeless end – and hopelessness breeds dissipation." (D.E. Garland)

3. Stop Being Absurd! Sober Up and Be Consistent With the Gospel in All Things!

- a. Moves to 2nd person imperatives: "You! You stop being fools!"
- b. Do not be deceived
 - i. "Bad company corrupts good morals"
 - 1. Quote from Greek poet Menander
 - a. Paul is using what was culturally known to make a point
 - 2. The irony here ought not be lost: Resurrection is about moving from corruption to incorruption (vv42), and any association with moral corruption is moving in the wrong direction

- ii. There are those *among you* who are not wise or good, and they are influencing you
 - 1. These are not those ‘outside’ the Church, but rather those who claim to be believers and yet deny the resurrection
 - 2. Similar to 5:9-11, ‘do not associate with so-called brothers who are sexually immoral or greedy, idolaters, slanderers...’
- iii. Depart from those who do not rely upon the Gospel alone, for they are not among you and they will influence you for the worst
 - 1. We become like those to whom we subject ourselves – the word is ‘cohort’
 - 2. Let us not be deceived by those who are ignorant of God, even those who use ‘God’ terms and ‘Christian’ language
 - a. The gospel has truth claims which cannot be altered or redefined
 - b. Let us be wise and discerning in what we hear, listen to, watch, and read, for bad company corrupts good character.
- c. Sober up to righteousness
 - i. You are acting like drunk stupid unreasonable people without thought!
 - ii. Be reasonable, thoughtful, consistent with the gospel truth and walk accordingly
 - 1. In what ways are your practices inconsistent with the gospel truth?
 - 2. Do your weekly works portray your hope of resurrection?
- d. Stop sinning as a result of being thoughtless of the gospel in all things!
 - i. Some are ignorant of God
 - 1. This is the fundamental error in all these things – they are listening to those who don’t really know God
 - 2. It is because they denied the core tenets of the gospel by contextualizing its truth to the ‘common’ understanding of the day (Greek philosophy)
 - ii. Whenever you find yourself altering your understanding of God, His gospel, His Word, and are justifying it by culturally contextualized principles, you are engaging in sin.
- e. This is to your shame
 - i. In all their seeking of honor and of power and of prestige, this appeal to their culture’s worldview was shameful; foolish, not wise; stupid, not brilliant.
 - ii. More and more we have a choice of whose shame to bear: the world’s shame for believing and acting according to the gospel of Jesus Christ, Lord over all, or to bear the Lord’s shame for believing and acting according those ignorant of God by the ways and values of the world doomed to destruction

So, be consistent in your faith and your practice. Be thoughtful and reasonable and perseverant. Keep your eyes on the hope of God’s promises, particularly of resurrection and life, for what I believe about the future will directly affect how I live today. The resurrection gives us hope which perseveres through the suffering which gospel proclamation and righteousness will invite from the world, so that we do not either avoid proclaiming the truth out of fear of suffering, avoid living righteously out of fear of suffering, or we give up the fight because of threats to our lives and/or livelihood.

The Lord was raised from the dead, and we who are united to him by faith shall be, too. Take hope. Hang on, even when you despair of your very lives, and continue the mission to exalt the name of God in the proclamation of Jesus Christ, for to him whom overcomes God has granted to eat from the tree of life which is the paradise of God (Rev 2.7).