

Jason Upchurch - 1 Corinthians 15:29-34 - Hard Passages

This little section in **1 Cor.** is really one of the strangest in all of the book, mostly because it mentions one of the most bizarre things in the Bible: baptism for the dead.

What does that mean? What's that all about? To be really honest with you: I'm not 100% sure and most people admit they don't know either. But we'll get to that in a little bit.

But let me start by saying that what we believe as Christians will always play itself out in our ethics. What you believe will always affect how you live. Every time.

Let me give you a crazy example. I was talking to a family member of mine 7-8 years ago. And they claimed to be an atheist. They claim they don't believe in God. But they also claimed to be a good person, to follow basic moral standards. So I asked him if he had a dog, he did. And I asked him if the dog was drowning and my child drowning and he could only save one, which would it be? Is it the dog or is it my child? You know what he said? Probably the dog.

I kid you not. They were sincere. I had heard this line of questioning from a podcast called Wretched Radio and never in my wildest dreams thought I would hear this answer from someone I knew.

What you believe will always affect how you live. Always.

And it's no different with the Bible. If you misunderstand a major doctrine, all manner of craziness will be unleashed.

If you have a wrong understanding of marriage, all manner of craziness is unleashed: polygamy, polyandry, serial divorce/remarriage, putting off marriage and children forever, gender role confusion.

If you have a wrong understanding of being made in the image of God racism ensues, black supremacy, white supremacy, slavery, critical theories, reparations, wrong views of men and women.

When I was younger I thought that reading through doctrinal statements and theology was generally boring because "what does this really do to affect my life?" The answer is everything.

In construction the most important part - the foundation - is often also the most boring. No one gets excited about dirt and concrete and rebar. But if you get that wrong, the whole building falls.

The foundation of the Christian life is doctrine. It's understanding what God has revealed to us in his Word in an accurate way in order to represent him well and live a life to his glory.

Now, the big issue in this chapter is the future resurrection of all people when Jesus returns. Those who are believers in Christ are resurrected to glory in the NHNE, those who are not believers are resurrected into the lake of fire forever and ever.

And Paul calls out the Corinthians that their messed up view of resurrection is affecting their view of baptism. The foundation of resurrection has cracked, and it's affecting other areas of their life as well.

The issue of baptism here is front and center so I want to use that as our launching pad for our study through the Word of God this morning. Though we will look at some of the other affects as well.

But let me say, if you mess up the resurrection, a lot can go wrong - including baptism. If you mess up baptism, other things can go wrong. It's like a chain reaction of craziness.

There are plenty errors surrounding baptism. Some people wrongly believe baptism actually saves you. There are people who believe that when you're baptized you automatically speak in tongues. Mormons believe we should be baptized on behalf of dead people. Some people think baptism is not a thing anymore because we're in a new age. Some people have a vague notion that they should be baptized but don't really know why.

Other people believe that we should baptize infants. There's all manner of confusion to the issue of baptism and this verse, just to be honest, can add to it.

So here's really my goal: how do we think through a passage in the Bible that's difficult to understand? How do we go about studying that? And I want to give you some tools for doing that as we study this difficult passage on baptism.

Because let's be honest: there's some weird stuff in Scripture. And if you don't have a plan for how to tackle that then you'll get blown around. So I want to use this verse to equip you for dealing with difficult issues in the Bible, and we'll unpack it more in a bit.

1) We can approach the passage with humility.

Part of maturing as a believer is being able to come across a passage that doesn't make sense, or when you hear someone talk about a doctrine you've never thought of and not panic.

I'm 100% certain that you did not find the one verse in the Bible that will undo all of Christianity. We're gonna be all right.

Turn to Eph. 4:11-16 for a moment. **Read**

So part of my job as a pastor, and others' jobs as teachers and evangelists is to equip the congregation to go do with work of the ministry. You guys minister, we equip you to do that. But our goal is that you're not tossed around by every wind of doctrine. But rather you're rooted and grounded in truth.

We don't have it as much here, but in the Tri Cities where it's windy all the time, they'll often anchor new trees to the ground with wires because a new tree is weak and easily pushed over by the wind and the wires allow the tree to grow straight until they're strong enough to withstand the force of constant battering.

As you grow in Christ, you need to grow in understanding of doctrine so that you're not a 40 year old tree still needing to be anchored down by wire. I've known people who have been in the faith a decade and they still freak out whenever they come across a verse that sounds like you could lose your salvation.

Just to be really clear: there are no verses that say you can lose your salvation. They don't exist. There are passages that warn against falling away or apostatizing. But no one will ever go from being a chosen, justified child of God to a non-chosen, non-justified, non-child of God. It won't happen.

But people get blown around and that's not good. The goal of the Christian is to mature and turn around and make sure others are maturing as well.

Heb. 5:12 - talking to the whole congregation: For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the basic principles of the oracles of God. You can't eat meat, you're still on milk.

If you've been in the faith a while, you ought to be a teacher. Maybe you have a gift to teach the congregation as a whole, maybe you don't. But every single Christian should be encouraging and teaching and growing other believers into maturity.

Rom. 15:14: Paul says he is confident that the church is full of goodness, filled with knowledge, and able to instruct each other. The whole church should be able to instruct one another. That's part of maturing in the faith.

There's a growth that should be happening. And part of that is when you come across an odd verse, we can humbly know it's gonna be okay. So we approach it humbly.

2) We also give preference to clarity: we understand confusing verses in light of clear verses.

So we've got this unusual verse talking about baptism for the dead in the middle of a discussion on the future resurrection. What does that mean? Well, step one is to stop and ask: what do we know for sure about the resurrection and what do we know for sure about baptism?

We start with very clear teachings - those are the proverbial guardrails for us to understand the hard passages. So let's do a little theology of baptism. We've done a theology of future resurrection, so let's switch it up a bit.

Turn to Matthew 28. What is made clear is that this is a command. **Read 16-20**

So a few observations about baptism. First, it's a command; this is not optional. We go make disciples. How do you know when someone has become a disciple? What way do they show the church and God and the world that they're now a disciple - learner/follower - of Jesus? They get baptized. That's the crossing of the Rubicon.

Second, we baptize using a Trinitarian formula because all 3 members of the Trinity are involved in making someone a disciple of Jesus. Your salvation was planned by the Father, accomplished by the Son, and applied to your account by God the Holy Spirit.

Third, once we're a disciple, then we go commanding others to do the same thing. **Read 20**

Everyone in the body of Christ is commanded to go teach others about Christ call them to the same faith and obedience they have. If you follow Jesus and haven't been baptized, you should get baptized.

It's self-perpetuating. So baptism does not save, but baptism is the proverbial sign by which everyone knows someone is following Jesus.

Look at 1 Pet. 3:18-22. This verse itself is a little tough, but also helpful. **Read**

So we have the gospel: Jesus died for sins.

He proclaimed his victory to the spirits in prison - this is probably referring to him proclaiming victory to the demons who, during Noah's day, tried to corrupt humanity by procreating with women. Those demons are now in chains in hell. But those demons didn't stop God's plan; and Jesus proclaimed triumph over them.

But it was because of those demons that God deluged the entire world in a flood.

Baptism is like that. Just the like Ark saved people from God's judgement, so too baptism saves people from God's judgement.

Wait a minute: baptism saves us?? No.

Not the removal of dirt from the body. Not getting wet. What saves us, Peter says, is crying out to God for a good conscience.

What does that mean? In American society for decades now we've replaced baptism with walking the aisle as the sign that someone believes in Jesus and is saved. In American evangelism we hear, "If you believe in Jesus, raise your hand, fill out a card, come forward" and that's the sign that you're a believer. That's not actually the biblical model.

In the Bible, rather than filling out a card or raising your hand or coming forward or praying a prayer, the way you show that you're following Jesus is getting baptized.

See, even when we tell people to pray a prayer to be saved, no one would ever say it's the prayer itself that saves. I prayed a prayer when I was saved. Did praying save me? No. What saved me? Faith in Jesus.

Peter is saying that baptism is like a prayer. **Read 21**

When someone believes, rather than praying a prayer to God, the biblical model is to get baptized. You're saying "God, give me a good conscience! Forgive my sin! Save me from your judgement like you saved Noah."

And God will forgive your sin. But he doesn't forgive your sin because you're getting dunked. You know why he forgives your sin? Jesus. **Read 21**

So baptism - getting dunked doesn't save us. It's what baptism represents that saves us. Getting dunked is a type of prayer that someone cries out to God on the basis of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Now, here's something that's really interesting. I don't know if you noticed this. Remember, what 2 doctrines was Paul talking about in **1 Cor. 15**? Baptism and what? Resurrection. Did you notice those 2 are right here as well? **Read 20-22**

Isn't that interesting. Baptism is fundamentally linked to resurrection. Actually, in almost all the verse you might look up on baptism, the resurrection of Jesus is somewhere in the vicinity.

Why? Because it is Jesus's death and resurrection that we are mirroring in baptism. We go into the water to depict that we are united with him in his death. We die to our sins, he died for our sins.

And we are united with him in his resurrection. He rose to new life, we rise to newness of life - a new transformed life as a new creation.

When someone gets baptized part of what they're doing is proclaiming Jesus's death and resurrection, they're also proclaiming their death to sin and resurrection to newness of life, **and** they're proclaiming that they will one day rise physically from the grave just like Jesus.

And not only is baptism and resurrection connected - like in **1 Cor. 15** - but his reign over the universe now is connected. **Read 22**

Jesus's resurrection, his reign, our future resurrection and baptism are elements we see in **1 Cor. 15**. So let's **turn** back to **1 Cor. 15**. Now we have a little bit of a theology of baptism, we can at least think through this with fresh eyes.

So, when we come across a verse that's unusual we stay humble, look for clarity.

3) We look at the context of our passage. **Read 20-29**

So the whole context here is that Jesus did rise, and Jesus will reign and conquer over every enemy. And when he's subjected all things and all people to himself, he will turn and give it all to the Father. That's when he comes again, that's when we are resurrected physically.

And notice in **Vs. 29** there's a transition. "Otherwise." The NIV says "now if" which is a little less helpful. The point is that there's a logical connection here. If the dead are not raised, why are people being baptized on their behalf?

And he goes into a small shopping list of things that are pointless if the dead are not raised. **Read 30**

If there is no resurrection from the dead, why would anyone ever put themselves in any danger for Jesus? I mean, you'd want to live as long as you can if once you die that's it. Lights out it's all over. But what does Paul do? **Read 31**

Paul doesn't mean he actually dies, he means he's in constant danger for the gospel. That doesn't make any sense if there's no resurrection from the dead.

Just to be really clear: the gospel message we believe is worth dying for. It's worth laying our life down. Why? Because even if we die, we'll be with Jesus and one day our dead bodies will rise from the dust. **Read 32**

What does that mean? Fighting with the beasts at Ephesus? It could be referring to Christians who were thrown to lions as entertainment in Roman times. Christianity was illegal and often the punishment was to be

fed to beasts. And so he seems to be saying: what's the point of struggle for the name of Jesus - what's the point of persecution - if there's no resurrection?

There is no point. If we don't rise, then Jesus didn't rise and any persecution we might get from following him is absolutely useless.

You know what else is useless if we don't rise? Morals. **Read 32**

This phrase "eat and drink for tomorrow we die" refers to living a sinful life of drunkenness and sexual immorality.

It's a quote from **Isa. 22** where the Lord calls on his people to repent from their sin and instead they party. They have a massive feast and drink themselves full on wine and they're all cheering "let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die!"

Listen, you guys, if there's no resurrection, if there's no judgement, if there's no reward for living the Christian life, then we're better off living our whole life partying. Go get drunk, go indulge in sexual immorality. Don't deny yourself anything! If there's no resurrection, it's time to let loose.

At which point the Corinthians would be thinking: what?! Why would you ever commend that? Is Paul telling them to go do that? Of course not. Because there is a resurrection and a judgment and a reward for following Jesus. That's why he says this. **Read 33-34**

You know what he's saying? You Corinthians are living a drunken debauched life because you don't believe in a future resurrection. This is a strong rebuke. They have been deceived into some sort of false theology and therefore have become corrupt in their morals. Bad company ruins good morals. That was a saying from a Greek playwright but it captured the essence of what was going on:

They're around people with messed up theology and their lives are a moral train wreck as a result.

Side: who you hang out with matters. A lot of times we have this naive notion that we can win people to Jesus with kindness and love if we just hang out with them. Jesus hung out with sinners, after all.

Well, that's true he did, but Jesus was not corruptible. You and I are. If you're hanging out with people who are leading you astray, thinking that somehow maybe you're life will be a witness to them, you need to think again.

I've seen people become corrupted by an awful workplace or an awful school or an awful friend. And they think they're doing eternal good by being near people. And you can do good, but if they're influencing you to sin, rather than you influencing them to godliness things have to change.

Paul says this as a truth: bad company ruins good morals.

Prov. 13:20: whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm.

Be very careful who you spend a lot of time with. Be very careful who is influencing who. **Read 34**

It seems as though some were so influenced by this bad company with bad theology that they were steeped in sin and had very little knowledge of God as a result.

Now, that's the whole context. We blew over the baptism issue because I think we need to understand the context to get a feel for what's going on.

So we're humble, we seek clarity, we look at the context.

4) We think through options.

Now, in most passages, there are usually only a couple of possible interpretations of a passage. Maybe 2 or 3 legitimate options at the most.

This is a little unusual. Several commentators mention a guy named K. C. Thompson who lists over 200 different explanations (1 Corinthians 15, 29 and Baptism for the Dead,” *Studia Evangelica* 2.1 (TU 87), 647–59.)

Here are some options: (Matthew Henry, etc.)

1. The baptism could be figurative, in the sense of being baptized spiritually into Christ. So the argument would be “if we’re united spiritually to Christ in his death only - and not his resurrection - we are still dead in our sins.”
2. The baptism could be literal, in the sense of being baptized in water like Jesus commands, but it would be pointless if Jesus didn’t really rise because baptism depicts the death and resurrection of Jesus.
3. This could be referring to martyrs who had died for Jesus. Early Christians often referred to martyrdom as “baptism of blood”, meaning they were immersed in their own blood. So the logic would be: why die for Jesus if you won’t rise in the future?
4. It could be that some people who professed faith in Christ died without being baptized and the early church so elevated baptism that they would be baptized for the dead person. This is probably the most common view. This is essentially the view of the Mormon church. They are baptized on behalf of dead people so that - in their warped theology - will receive blessing in the next life.

There are many, many more.

I tend to lean toward this last one. I don’t know for sure, I wouldn’t die on this hill. But it seems like what had happened is that the Corinthians had gotten into a situation where they knew baptism was important but there may have been cases where someone professed faith in Jesus and died before getting baptized.

And so a person would be baptized on behalf of the dead person. That seems to be the plain understanding here. **Read 29**

NIV: Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized for them?

The word “on behalf of” literally means baptized in place of someone else. It’s vicarious baptism. And the someone else in this passage seems to be a dead person.

So maybe the church had done this once or twice, maybe it had become a regular thing, we don’t know. But Paul’s main point here is that if there is no future resurrection of the dead, then being baptized for a dead person is pointless.

If there’s no future resurrection, what’s the point of getting baptized at for them? They’re dead and lost in their sin! **Read 17-18**

He’s saying if they’re lost, if they’re in hell, what good is baptism for them? It’s of no use.

He’s using a *reductio ad absurdum* argument. He’s reducing their argument to an absurdity.

Now, here’s why this makes us uncomfortable: He doesn’t chastise them for baptizing on behalf of dead people, does he? Never rebukes them for that.

Why not? We don’t know. We’d sure like him to, but the most we get is that he rebukes them for their denial of the resurrection, which is the bigger problem.

You’ll go to hell if you deny the resurrection. You won’t necessarily go to hell if you’re getting baptized for someone who has died, although that’s really weird.

Here’s what we can say: we don’t ever see this practice anywhere in the Bible, we don’t see it mentioned in the early church - outside of this verse.

Interestingly, even in this verse it's not commanded as something to do, rather the whole concept is scrapped because it's pointless if there is no resurrection.

So what do we do here? How do we understand this given 200 options?

We say, look, there's no command to do this and the clearest passages we have on baptism don't mention it. The important point he's making is that we believe and live in light of the resurrection.

We don't make a whole doctrine out of baptizing for dead people, we certainly don't make this a ministry.

There are sometimes when we see a passage that is very specific to the context. Paul telling Timothy to drink some wine for his stomach ailments. Euodia and Syntyche were fighting in Phillippi and Paul told them to knock it off. We don't know all the details of those situations, that's okay.

We don't know all the details of this one. That's okay. We can be faithful with what we do know to the glory of God.

Pray