

## Thinking Rightly about the Resurrection (1 Cor. 15:29–34)

*By Jacob Gerber*

Earlier in 1 Corinthians 15:12–19, Paul had traced out the horrifying consequences that *would* be true if Christ had *not* been raised from the dead. Then, in v. 20–28, Paul explained the wonderful consequences that *are* true *since* Christ *has* been raised from the dead. As one final word to give superabundant proof that Christ has been raised from the dead, Paul now adds “experiential arguments are adduced in favour of the resurrection.”<sup>1</sup> Paul marks this transition by the word “otherwise” in v. 29: “otherwise,” if Christ has not been raised, these various actions and experiences (which Paul goes on to list out) would make no sense.<sup>2</sup> There are roughly three sets of these actions and experiences, marked by changes in the personal prepositions: (1) what *they* do (v. 29); (2) what *I/we* do (v. 30–32); and (3) what *you* do (v. 33–34).<sup>3</sup> Especially, Paul warns that if the church abandons right *thinking* about the resurrection of Christ, then they will also abandon right *living* in obedience to Christ.<sup>4</sup> Put simply, Paul here urges us to *think rightly about the resurrection*.

### The Reorientation of Baptism (1 Cor. 15:29)

Paul begins with the most puzzling action: people who are being baptized on behalf of the dead (v. 29). Barnett rightly summarizes the confusion about this statement by observing that this is “a practice no doubt as familiar to them as it is puzzling to us.”<sup>5</sup> Whatever Paul meant by this, the Corinthians must have understood it, even while we struggle to understand what this means. Most naturally, the phrase seems to describe some kind of vicarious baptism, where one (living) person was baptized on behalf of another (dead) person.<sup>6</sup> There are several problems with understanding the language this way, however. First, while there are indeed records of heretical sects employing such a practice of vicarious baptism, those practices did not occur until the second century, with no hint of anything like this occurring when Paul wrote to the Corinthian church.<sup>7</sup> Second, and more importantly, such a “magical” view of baptism’s benefits (able to be applied vicariously, for someone already dead) would not fit with Paul’s own theology of baptism. Garland rightly asks, “would he tacitly sanction (through silence) such a practice simply to score a point for his argument about the resurrection? To win one argument, he opens a Pandora’s box

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<sup>1</sup> Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 317.

<sup>2</sup> Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 337.

<sup>3</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 844.

<sup>4</sup> Hays, *First Corinthians*, 266.

<sup>5</sup> Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 362.

<sup>6</sup> Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 210.

<sup>7</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 846–47.

of new theological problems.<sup>8</sup> Third, in a letter where Paul has condemned all manner of corrupted practices among the Corinthians, it is hard to believe that he would appeal to this bizarre practice without a word of condemnation against it.<sup>9</sup> In all, it is unlikely that Paul refers to any kind of vicarious baptism on behalf of those who have already died. Even if that were his intention, however, we should remember that Paul does not necessarily embrace the practice, since he only speaks of what “they” do. If Paul does appeal to some practice of vicarious baptism, then Paul is appealing to the motivations behind the practice (i.e., confidence in a resurrection from the dead), and not the practice itself.<sup>10</sup>

If the language does not refer to such a vicarious baptism, then commentators have offered a number of other options that attempt to do justice to the language, while side-stepping the problems of interpreting this as a vicarious baptism.<sup>11</sup> Of those options, some of the more plausible suggestions would include (1) baptisms given early to catechumens (converts to Christianity who had not completed their training in the faith) who were on their deathbed;<sup>12</sup> (2) baptisms performed for those who converted to Christianity after seeing loved ones profess Christ and express confidence in a coming resurrection as they approached death;<sup>13</sup> (3) a reference to the fact that we are baptized into Christ’s death, and thus *as* dead people (cf. Rom. 6:3).<sup>14</sup> This last option has particular appeal, since in Romans 6 Paul not only says that we were baptized into the *death* of Christ, but into his *resurrection* also. Whatever Paul is saying here in v. 29, he means to demonstrate that these baptisms are done with anticipation of our own resurrection. Ultimately, we do not know what Paul means. The important point, then, is that this practice makes no sense unless there will be a resurrection of the dead.

Practically, then, Paul is reminding us that our baptism has a practical purpose of reorienting our thinking toward confidence in the coming resurrection. Our baptism is, after all, “a sign and seal of...resurrection unto everlasting life.”<sup>15</sup> Whatever the Corinthians may or may not be doing, Paul is urging them to think more carefully of why they were baptized in the first place, as well as the practical significance of what that baptism should play in their lives right now. Older theologians spoke of “improving our baptism,” which does not mean improving *on* our baptism, as though we were trying to make it better. The older meaning of “improve” is to “use,” or “employ,” or “apply,” and that’s what we mean when we speak of improving our baptism—we should put it to good use.

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<sup>8</sup> Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 717.

<sup>9</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, 34–37. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom40/calcom40.i.iv.html>>

<sup>10</sup> Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 209–10.

<sup>11</sup> For summaries, see: Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 337–38; Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 723–24; Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 845–50; Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 1240–49.

<sup>12</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, 37. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom40/calcom40.i.iv.html>>

<sup>13</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 690. Thiselton, *First Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical & Pastoral Commentary*, 275.

<sup>14</sup> Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 717–18.

<sup>15</sup> *Westminster Larger Catechism*, #165. 1 Corinthians 15:29 is cited as a proof-text for this phrase.

Westminster Larger Catechism #167 is excellent on talking about the various ways in which we may improve our baptisms:

Q. 167. How is baptism to be improved by us?

A. The needful but much neglected duty of improving our baptism, is to be performed by us all our life long, especially in the time of temptation, and when we are present at the administration of it to others; by serious and thankful consideration of the nature of it, and of the ends for which Christ instituted it, the privileges and benefits conferred and sealed thereby, and our solemn vow made therein; by being humbled for our sinful defilement, our falling short of, and walking contrary to, the grace of baptism, and our engagements; by growing up to assurance of pardon of sin, and of all other blessings sealed to us in that sacrament; by drawing strength from the death and resurrection of Christ, into whom we are baptized, for the mortifying of sin, and quickening of grace; and by endeavoring to live by faith, to have our conversation in holiness and righteousness, as those that have therein given up their names to Christ; and to walk in brotherly love, as being baptized by the same Spirit into one body.

Baptism only takes place once, at the beginning of our discipleship. Nevertheless, God calls us to apply our baptism to our lives throughout our discipleship. Paul wants the Corinthians to give “serious and thankful consideration of the nature” of baptism, so that they might draw “strength from the death and resurrection of Christ, into whom we are baptized.”

### **The Rationality of Suffering (1 Cor. 15:30–32)**

In the next section, Paul steps out of the shadows of our ignorance into the clear light of what the rest of the New Testament correlates in several places: the persecution Paul has faced for the sake of the gospel. Not only throughout the book of Acts, but also in a few other points in his letters (e.g., 2 Cor. 11:23–29; Phil. 3:8–11), we read extensively of Paul’s great sufferings. As an apostle, Paul truly was in danger every hour (v. 30). In v. 31, Paul uses language associated with oath-swearing to bear witness to the depth of his suffering, where he dies “every day.” Specifically, he swears by his “pride” or “glory” or “boasting” over the Corinthians, who were the “seals of his ministry” as an apostle.<sup>16</sup> If anyone should know his willingness to suffer, the Corinthians should.

Why, though, would Paul be willing to go through this terrible ordeal if he were not confident of a coming resurrection from the dead? What could he possibly gain, humanly speaking, from the extensive sufferings he has endured? Paul mentions fighting with beasts in Ephesus in v. 32, and, while it is possible he means this literally, we do not read about this event anywhere else in the New Testament. Furthermore, both the writers of the Old Testament<sup>17</sup> and ancient secular writers would

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<sup>16</sup> Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 339.

<sup>17</sup> “In the Old Testament adversaries are depicted as fierce animals wanting to tear God’s people to pieces (Pss 22:12–13; 35:17; 57:4; 58:6; Isa. 5:29; Jer. 2:15); thus Paul’s opponents are depicted metaphorically as ravening and ferocious animals (cf. 2 Tim. 4:16–17).” (Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 318.)

often talk about clashes with *human* enemies in terms of battling with vicious beasts.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, it is likely that Paul is speaking metaphorically here about the great suffering he endured at the hands of human beings rather than animals. In English, we might paraphrase this by saying that Paul was “tossed to the wolves.”

Paul’s point, though, is not to underscore the suffering itself. Paul’s point is to ask *why* he would endure such suffering if there were no resurrection from the dead. He remarks, “If the dead are not raised, ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die’” (v. 32; cf. Isa. 22:13). If there is no hope for a life in the *future*, why should we not live for as much pleasure as possible in the *present*? If Christians have no hope of a coming reward, then we lose all motivation for endurance.<sup>19</sup> We would truly be of all people most to be pitied (v. 19). By appealing to his own actions, Paul proves his own confidence in a coming resurrection of the dead. If the dead will indeed be raised, then suffering for the sake of Christ is the most rational thing we could ever do.

## The Repercussions of Thinking (1 Cor. 15:33–34)

After appealing to what “they” do (v. 29) and what “I/we” do (v. 30–32), Paul directs his attention to “you” by imperatives that he gives to the Corinthians. He begins to urging them, “Do not be deceived” (v. 33). Paul is drawing the Corinthians’ attention to their *thinking*, since he believes that their thinking has been deceived. Specifically, Paul urges them not to be deceived that “bad company ruins good morals.” The word for *company* can either refer to *companionship* (people) or *conversations* (talking/thinking).<sup>20</sup> Earlier, Paul said that “some of you [are saying] that there is no resurrection of the dead” (v. 12). Now, Paul is urging them not to be deceived by these people, or what they are saying.

Paul’s point here is that our *thinking* is not necessarily innocent. John Calvin wisely writes this pastoral counsel: “Now it is a sentiment that is particularly worthy of attention, for Satan, when he cannot make a direct assault upon us, deludes us under this pretext, that there is nothing wrong in our raising any kind of disputation with a view to the investigation of truth. Here, therefore, Paul in opposition to this, warns us that we must guard against *evil communications*, as we would against the most deadly poison, *because*, insinuating themselves secretly into our minds, they straightway corrupt our whole life.”<sup>21</sup> Not all doubts about the Christian faith, then, are generated by honest intellectual questions, for many intellectual doubts arise merely from a corrupted desire to free ourselves of Christianity so that we can live according to the patterns of the world.<sup>22</sup> Our thinking affects our desires, and our desires affect our thinking. If we *want* something to be true, our desires work to

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<sup>18</sup> Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 339–40.

<sup>19</sup> Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 366–67.

<sup>20</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 856.

<sup>21</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, 43. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom40/calcom40.i.iv.html>>

<sup>22</sup> “We also see here that questions about and deviation from the Christian faith may stem from the moral lives of those with whom one associates. Some doubts are not generated by legitimate intellectual questions; they stem from associating with people who live in a way that is not pleasing to God.” (Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 319.)

reshape our *minds* to rationalize and justify our pursuit of sin.

Paul suggests that this kind of corrupted thinking makes our reasoning inebriated, intoxicated, and impaired. So, he tells us to “wake up from your drunken stupor, as is right, and do not go on sinning” (v. 34). When our minds are not fixed out what is “right,” then our rationality becomes a tool of the enemy to lead us into sin.<sup>23</sup> We believe that we are thinking clearly and rationally, but we are not. What is the “right” that should anchor our thinking? The Scriptures teach in several places that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (e.g., Job 28:28; Ps. 111:10; Prov. 9:10). Furthermore, the Scriptures teach that those who deny God are “fools” (Ps. 14:1; 53:1). Paul warns the Corinthians, though, that “some have no knowledge of God” (v. 34). Apparently, these people who are ignorant of God, and who therefore have corrupted thinking that even denies the resurrection, are leading the Corinthians astray into sin. Paul exposes this deception to the “shame” of the Corinthians, who should know better.

## Discussion Questions

1. How should our baptism draw our minds and our faith toward Christ’s resurrection, and our own resurrection to come? What does it mean to improve our baptism? How much of a role does your baptism play in your day-to-day life? What is one area of your life (of temptation, weakness, fear, etc.) that you might draw strength from the death and resurrection of Christ, into whom you were baptized?
2. How does Paul argue that suffering is *rational*? Humanly speaking, why does putting ourselves in a position to experience suffering seem to be thoroughly irrational? How does the resurrection change the way we understand what is rational and irrational? In the way that you live your life, in what ways are you guided by the rationality of human reasoning to avoid suffering at all costs? In what ways do you recognize that faithfulness to Christ, even if it requires suffering, is the only rational way to live?
3. Why is our thinking so important? What are some of the things that the Bible tells us about our thinking? Why is it wisdom to fear the Lord, and foolishness to declare that there is no God? How often do you think about the resurrection? How do your thoughts about the resurrection (for good or for ill) work their way into the way you live (for good or for ill)? How might you think more deeply about the resurrection promises of the gospel this week?

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<sup>23</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, 44. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom40/calcom40.i.iv.html>>