

“Meaningless, Meaningless—Everything is Meaningless”
1 Corinthians 15:29-34

Introduction

- *These are the words of the Quester, David's son and king in Jerusalem. Smoke, nothing but smoke. [That's what the Quester says.] There's nothing to anything—it's all smoke.*
What's there to show for a lifetime of work,
a lifetime of working your fingers to the bone?
One generation goes its way, the next one arrives,
but nothing changes—it's business as usual for old planet earth.
The sun comes up and the sun goes down,
then does it again, and again—the same old round.
The wind blows south, the wind blows north.
Around and around and around it blows,
blowing this way, then that—the whirling, erratic wind.
All the rivers flow into the sea,
but the sea never fills up.
The rivers keep flowing to the same old place,
and then start all over and do it again.
Everything's boring, utterly boring—
no one can find any meaning in it.
Boring to the eye,
boring to the ear.
What was will be again,
what happened will happen again.
There's nothing new on this earth.
Year after year it's the same old thing.
Does someone call out, "Hey, this is new"?
Don't get excited—it's the same old story.
Nobody remembers what happened yesterday.
And the things that will happen tomorrow?
Nobody'll remember them either.
Don't count on being remembered.
- *I said to myself, "Let's go for it—experiment with pleasure, have a good time!" But there was nothing to it, nothing but smoke.*
What do I think of the fun-filled life? Insane! Inane!
My verdict on the pursuit of happiness? Who needs it?
With the help of a bottle of wine
and all the wisdom I could muster,
I tried my level best
to penetrate the absurdity of life.
I wanted to get a handle on anything useful we mortals might do
during the years we spend on this earth.

- *Oh, I did great things: built houses,
planted vineyards,
designed gardens and parks
and planted a variety of fruit trees in them,
made pools of water
to irrigate the groves of trees.
I bought slaves, male and female,
who had children, giving me even more slaves;
then I acquired large herds and flocks,
larger than any before me in Jerusalem.
I piled up silver and gold,
loot from kings and kingdoms.
I gathered a chorus of singers to entertain me with song,
and—most exquisite of all pleasures—
voluptuous maidens for my bed.*
- *Oh, how I prospered! I left all my predecessors in Jerusalem far behind, left them behind in the dust. What's more, I kept a clear head through it all. Everything I wanted I took—I never said no to myself. I gave in to every impulse, held back nothing. I sucked the marrow of pleasure out of every task—my reward to myself for a hard day's work!*
- *Then I took a good look at everything I'd done, looked at all the sweat and hard work. But when I looked, I saw nothing but smoke. Smoke and spitting into the wind. There was nothing to any of it. Nothing.¹*
- Solomon's conclusion about life? It's meaningless. Smoke. His advice? *Fear God, do what he tells you.*²
- Fast forward to 1 Corinthians 15:29-34. Paul makes exactly the same point with one difference.

Proposition

- **The Christian life is utterly meaningless if there is no resurrection**
- If there is no resurrection you and I are left crying meaningless, meaningless, vanity, vanity, smoke, smoke about this thing called the Christian life. In 1 Corinthians 15:29-34 there are...

Organizational Sentence

- **Three (3) vanities of the Christian life if there is no resurrection**
- If something is vain it's worthless, trivial, pointless. If there is no such thing as a resurrection of the dead, which is what the Corinthians were saying, 1 Corinthians 15:12, then Paul says three things about the Christian life are absolutely vain—they're pointless, they're meaningless.
- What does he say? He argues not from theology but from experience. Theirs and his. In [verse 29](#) Paul says if there is no resurrection, if the dead do not rise, then the Christian

¹ Ecclesiastes 1-2 (The Message)

² Ecclesiastes 12:13

experience of baptism is pointless. In [verses 30-32a](#) he says if there is no resurrection then the experience of personal sacrifice, hardship, suffering, risk—they have no meaning. Then in [32b-34](#) he says if there is no such thing as a resurrection it's useless trying to be moral. Three [vanities](#), three worthless, pointless parts of the Christian life if there is no resurrection.

- Have you ever received an email attachment but didn't have the right program to open that attachment? If you do, all you get is gobbledygook. It's the same with the Christian life. Without the resurrection this thing called the Christian life is just gobbledygook. It's pointless.

Transition

Look at [verse 29](#). *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?*

Main Points

- Paul's point in [verse 29](#) is that this wet, messy, cold, embarrassing spectacle, this public confession of Christ, this ancient ritual of immersion, this thing called baptism, is absolutely pointless if there is no resurrection. How could the Corinthians who themselves personally practiced this ritual, with its triumphant moment of resurrection from the water symbolizing our resurrection to new life, as practitioners of resurrection—how in the world could they deny a resurrection? That's idiotic. The ritual of baptism assumes there to be a future resurrection of the dead.³ Duh.
- Let me say a word about the phrase *baptized for the dead*. There are about forty different ideas as to what this phrase means. It would be pointless for me to try to summarize all of them. Let me just say what it doesn't mean. There is no solid evidence that this refers to living Christians being baptized for the sake of dead people who died but hadn't been baptized, ala Mormonism. There's no evidence for it. In the words of [Gordon Fee](#), "There is no historical or biblical precedent for a baptism like that. The New Testament is otherwise completely silent about it; there is no known practice in any of the other churches nor in any orthodox Christian community in the centuries that immediately follow."⁴
- If this phrase *baptism for the dead* did refer to the practice of Christians being baptized for those who had passed on why doesn't Paul condemn it more harshly? It goes against everything Paul taught regarding justification by faith and the complete and sufficient work of Christ on the cross to save. It has to mean something else.
- What? I think the phrase simply refers to is the practice of baptism—as Christians have always practiced it—no more, no less. Now, if Paul is simply referring to baptism, the term *dead* has to be taken, not literally, but metaphorically. In other words, at baptism, Christians are dead in their sins, dead to God, dead in our spirits. We are in a sense dead corpses awaiting physical death—which is what Ephesians 2:1, Colossians 2:13, and Romans 6, imply, right? Every single Christian who has ever been baptized has received a baptism for their dead body. And the hope of baptism is that one day that dead body will rise—just like Christ's body rose—which is exactly Paul's point to the Corinthians. *If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized for them?* In other words, "what do those hope to

³ Garland, p. 716.

⁴ Fee, p. 764.

achieve who are baptized for their dying bodies? If the completely dead are not raised, why then are they baptized for themselves as corpses?"⁵

- Again, whatever *baptism for the dead* means Paul's point is clear. Whatever the Corinthians were doing, and for whatever reason, Paul says they were living, breathing contradictions. Practitioners of baptism, on the one hand, which implies a future resurrection, and on the other hand, denying that same resurrection. If the dead do not rise it makes no sense to be baptized. Vanity of vanities. Pointless. Waste of time.
- Here's the application for us. If you are a Christian, and you haven't yet been baptized, what in the world are you waiting for? First and foremost it's a matter of obedience. Christ commanded it. But, more subtly, here's what you are communicating by not being baptized. What you're really saying is that you believe dead bodies don't really rise from the dead. Because if they do, and if that's what you say you believe, then you're a walking contradiction—just like the Corinthians who had the opposite problem—they baptized but denied a resurrection. In your case you believe in a resurrection but deny baptism. You can't have one without the other. They go together. Baptism is simply an extension of our belief in the resurrection. Baptism is a drama, a three act play; a reenactment of the central truths of the Christian faith. Act 1, we die to sin through Christ. Act 2, we're buried with Christ. Act 3, we rise to new life in Christ. Romans 6:3-4. *Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death. In order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.* And the fix is so easy. Just talk to me and we'll do something about it.

Transition

Let's move on. Look at the **second vanity** of the Christian life if there is no resurrection. **Verse 30.** *And as for us, why do we endanger ourselves every hour? 31 I die every day--I mean that, brothers--just as surely as I glory over you in Christ Jesus our Lord. 32 If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus for merely human reasons, what have I gained.* If there is no such thing as a resurrection **then personal sacrifice, hardship, suffering, risk—they're all meaningless.** Wastes of time. Pointless.

- Paul says elsewhere in Scripture, Romans 8:18 for instance, *I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.* He says in 2 Corinthians 4:10 *we always carry around in our body the death of Jesus.* In **verse 31** Paul says *I die every day.* In other words, as a Christian "everyday he's at death's door." "From day to day I court fatality" as one commentator put it.⁶ Paul's point is simple and clear. Personal sacrifice, suffering, risk, hardship for the sake of the gospel, they're all meaningless if there is no resurrection. If the dead do not rise then those things are wasted efforts. They're vanities. They're useless. Why *endanger ourselves every hour* as he says in **verse 30**? Why do it? If the dead do not rise to life *what has he gained, verse 32*? Or anyone, for that matter, who endures hardship or suffering or risk in the name of Christ, what have they gained? Absolutely nothing.

⁵ Garland, p. 718.

⁶ Thisleton.

- I don't know about you but the picture of the Christian life that Paul gives here is so very different than the experience of most of us, isn't it? Hardship? Suffering? Risk? Danger? Yeah, right. Maybe a little lost sleep now and then. Maybe some difficult conversations now and then. Maybe some personal sacrifices when it comes to family life. Maybe some hardships monetarily speaking. But all in all we give up very little by identifying with Jesus. Our lives, comparatively speaking, are a cakewalk; we live the powder-puff version of what Paul describes.
- He even says his ministry in Ephesus, which was where he was writing this letter to the Corinthians, he says his ministry there was difficult—like fighting wild beasts. Not literally. Romans citizens were exempt from being thrown to animals in the gladiator's ring.⁷ Metaphorically speaking he fought wild beasts; "bloodthirsty human antagonists" who would try to tear him to pieces during his ministry in Ephesus.⁸ I know we're not apostles. But when was the last time you fought a wild beast for Jesus?
- What Paul is in essence saying is that because there is a future resurrection we can and should sacrifice for the gospel. We should take risks. Big risks—time wise, monetarily, people wise, you name it. We can put ourselves in danger—maybe in ways others can't.
- Mountaineer [Tom Whittaker](#) once said in an interview, "One of the things that really attracts me about mountaineering is its total pointlessness. So I've dedicated my life to it."⁹ But we're not like the mountaineer dedicating ourselves to something that's pointless. Our risks can be calculated and big and daring, our sacrifices great, are hardships intense. Why? Because we know this life is not the end. If the dead do not rise yeah all that stuff is crazy. If there is no resurrection all those sacrifices, those risks, those hardships, all his struggles for the gospel are in vain. But if the dead really do rise, and they do, then we must have a radically different mindset, a mountaineering mindset, about the way we live the Christian life.
- On the other hand, I know some of you here and your circumstances and in your walk with Christ you've been fighting the wild beasts of life *ad nauseum*. In your heart of hearts you're ready to give up and give in. Don't. You feel what Paul said in 2 Corinthians 1:9 *Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death*. Don't quit the fight. These things happen to us, as Paul says, so that *we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead*. Keep fighting. Keep persevering. Your sacrifice, your hardship, your suffering it is not in vain because Jesus has been raised.

Transition

Finally, the [third vanity](#) of the Christian life if there is no resurrection. [Verse 32b](#). *If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."* [33](#) *Do not be misled: "Bad company corrupts good character."* [34](#) *Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning; for there are some who are ignorant of God--I say this to your shame.*

- If the dead do not rise to life, *if the dead are not raised*, then it's [Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure](#) for all of us. "Party on, dudes." If the dead are not raised we might as well have a party hearty mentality. *"Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."* In other words, if the

⁷ Blomberg, p. 299.

⁸ Garland, p. 721.

⁹ Submitted to preachingtoday.com by Lee Eclov, Lake Forest, Illinois; source: Time (4-20-98).

dead do not rise, what's the point of moral standards? Moral standards collapse,¹⁰ being moral, trying to be good, trying to please God with a holy life—it's all vanity, useless, pointless.

- Paul cites two sources, an Old Testament text, Isaiah 22:13, *But see, there is joy and revelry, slaughtering of cattle and killing of sheep, eating of meat and drinking of wine! "Let us eat and drink," you say, "for tomorrow we die!"* and the Greek poet Meander *"Bad company corrupts good character"* to make his point that there is an intrinsic connection between morality and the resurrection. On the one hand he says that if there is no resurrection morality goes out the window. The best and wisest thing to do is live it up because we're all going to die anyway. And on the other hand he says denying the resurrection has a corrupting influence. Denying the resurrection corrupts one's internal moral compass. *"Bad company corrupts good character"*
- And his advice to the Corinthians is to quit partying like it's 1989 and sober up—verse 34, *come back to your senses as you ought* and wake up. Come out of your drunken stupor and realize the resurrection has incredible ethical implications for how we live. And if Paul were here this morning he might say the same thing to some of us. "Come on guys, look at the way you're living. You can't actually live the way you're living and do the things you're doing and say you believe in the resurrection too. For crying out loud. Jesus rose. There is going to be a resurrection. We can't just do whatever we want, say whatever we want, watch whatever we want, and think whatever we want. The dead rise. There are moral standards. So start living up to what's going to happen to you in the future. You're going to rise to new life then. Start living that new life now." Or as Paul really puts it. *Stop sinning!* You're acting as if you're ignorant of God; *for there are some who are ignorant of God,* verse 34.

Conclusion

- Do you see what Paul is doing here in this passage? **The Christian life is utterly meaningless if there is no resurrection.** It's all vanity. Baptism. Vanity. Hardship, suffering, risk. Vanity. Moral standards. Vanity. If there is no resurrection you and I are left with the words of the Quaker. *But when I looked, I saw nothing but smoke. Smoke and spitting into the wind. There was nothing to any of it. Nothing.*
- Just before his death Mark Twain said "A myriad of men are born; they labor and sweat and struggle;...they squabble and scold and fight; they scramble for little mean advantages over each other; age creeps upon them; infirmities follow; ...those they love are taken from them, and the joy of life is turned to aching grief. It (the release) comes at last--the only unpoisoned gift earth ever had for them--and they vanish from a world where they were of no consequence...a world which will lament them a day and forget them forever."
- Praise God nothing could be farther from the truth because we know our Redeemer lives. Amen? Pray with me.

¹⁰ Garland, p. 721.