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Sermon Notes

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The Transforming Power of Believing in the Resurrection

1 Corinthians 15:29-34

It is amazing how relevant this ancient epistle of Paul to a dysfunctional local church really is! The similarities between 1st century pagan Corinth and 21st century increasingly pagan America is striking, if you know what to look for

Paul is calling on the Corinthian Christians to live clearly supernatural lives surrounded constantly by the magnetic alluring pull of sensual temptations and corrupting worldviews.

These Christians had only recently come out of this paganism, and they had to resist the sensual allurements of their old wicked lifestyle. To make matters worse, the philosophies of their current age were undercutting one of the most important doctrines in all of Christianity... the doctrine of the bodily resurrection from the dead.

Many Greek philosophical systems were anti-materialist... believing the flesh, the physical body was the seat of all the problems in the human life. They believed in the realm of the pure mind and spirit, and that the body was like a fleshly prison from which the pure spirit was seeking escape.

These worldly philosophies had crept into the church, and there were actually some Corinthians in the church who were denying the possibility or even desirability of the resurrection of the body:

1 Corinthians 15:12 But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?

So, Paul has been laboring to crush this deadly doctrine... because without faith in the bodily resurrection of Christ from the dead, we cannot be saved

For 28 verses, Paul traced out the wise, eternal plan of God for dealing with sin and death. For sin brought all these enemies into the universe. And all of them will be reconciled to the throne of God or destroyed under his feet. So in the end, everything that remains will be totally harmonized under the rule of God... in subjection to God's wise, loving, unchanging, perfect throne:

1 Corinthians 15:28 When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.

Having traced out this argument concerning the resurrection from the dead, Paul now (in verses 29-34) shows both the transforming power of faith in the resurrection from the dead, and by contrast, devastating ethical consequences of NOT BELIEVING in the resurrection from the dead.

It actually truly matters what you believe. If you think that this world is all there is, and atoms are all there are, and that thoughts and motives and dreams and plans and feelings are all merely electrical charges going off in the nerve endings of your brain, and all life has evolved from atoms rearranging themselves in ever-higher order... then it will affect how you live. But if you think that this world is NOT ALL THERE IS, and there is a Judgment Day coming in which what you did in the body will be evaluated by God, and that you will spend eternity in the NEXT WORLD, and how you live in this world will affect your circumstances of the next world... then of course that will affect how you live in this world.

Putting verses 29-34 positively, I believe Paul is proving the transforming power in daily life of belief in the resurrection from the dead.

- 1) Power for Conversion through Faith in Christ; 2) Power to Endure Suffering for the Glory of Christ; 3) Power to Live for Christ, Not Temporary Pleasures

I. Power for Conversion through Faith in Christ

1 Corinthians 15:29 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?

A. Undoubtedly One of the Most Obscure Verses in the New Testament

1. All Scripture is God-breathed and perfect... exactly how God wants it to be (2 Tim. 3:16)
2. BUT not all Scripture is equally clear! Peter said about “our dear brother Paul”:

2 Peter 3:16 His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.

3. This is a plain example!
4. No one is 100% what this verse is teaching
 - a. And that there are HARD VERSES in the Bible should actually encourage us
 - b. We believe that the Bible is “The Word of God written”
 - c. The word of GOD... the Almighty, ineffable, eternal God... flowing from the mind of the Being who created the universe
 - d. The fact that there is both MILK and MEAT in the Bible proves that it comes from the mind of God to the entire human race
 - e. Milk refers to easy things, so simple a child could understand them: there is a God, He made everything, he has given us laws

to obey, we have all sinned, we deserve to die for our sins; God sent His Son, Jesus Christ; Christ died in our place; Christ rose from the dead; if we believe in Him, our sins will be forgiven;
MILK

- f. Meat... refers to things “hard to understand” or perhaps merely HARD TO ACCEPT... difficult doctrines, like God’s sovereignty and human responsibility, or the Trinity, or the details of the Incarnation of Christ...
- g. or specific verses like this one that elude full understanding
- h. If we could easily understand everything in the Bible, and it never crosses us or confuses us or challenges us or rebukes us or confounds us... it would be evidence that it is purely man-made
- i. Peter says that Paul writes some things that “are difficult to understand” which “ignorant and unstable people” (false teachers) have DISTORTED... TWISTED... bent to their own purposes
- j. This verse is definitely one of them... the “baptism for the dead”

1 Corinthians 15:29 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?

- 5. Church history has given us clear examples of false teaching based in part on this verse
 - a. The “baptism for the dead” seems to imply living people being baptized to benefit the dead
 - b. Generally the false implications have to do with things the living can do to affect the circumstances of the dead
 - c. In the Roman Catholic system, the doctrine of purgatory is a clear example... purgatory was taught as a place where Christians who died in sin could go to have the residual effects of their unforgiven sins PURGED from their souls by fire

similar to hell. Frankly, the only difference between purgatory and hell is that hell is eternal, but purgatory is not

- d. the doctrine was floated as a possibility by Augustine... but it was seized on by Pope Gregory the Great

Gregory (Pope from 590-604) told the story of a monk who had died in sin, and who was sent to purgatory. Gregory himself had ordered that a mass be said every day for thirty days for this dead monk, whose departed soul then appeared to another monk in that monastery at the end of the thirty days saying that the masses had been effective in releasing him from purgatory and translating him to heaven. [Shelley, 181] That these views were mere superstition and had no basis in scripture but affected people's views of salvation deeply set a dangerous precedent for the Roman Catholic church which only the Reformation would fully address.

- e. Purgatory became the basis of a lot of acts of piety done for about a thousand years;
- f. Basic concept: ACTS OF PIETY DONE ON EARTH CAN BENEFIT THE DEAD IN PURGATORY; "baptism for the dead" could be seen in that light, though it is FALSE
- g. The ancient gnostic heretic Marcion picked up on this verse and taught a doctrine of vicarious baptism the living could do to benefit dead people
- h. Beyond this, the Mormons have built a whole doctrine on this one verse; as part of their theology, they have a secret ritual of "baptism for the dead"

B. What This Verse is NOT Teaching

1. Paul is not teaching baptismal regeneration... that one has to be baptized in order to be saved
2. Neither is he teaching any connection whatsoever between the actions of the living and the change in circumstances for the dead

3. Masses for the dead, baptism for the dead, prayers for the dead... all of these are ruled out forever by New Testament theology... a sinner is justified by HIS OR HER OWN faith in Jesus Christ... not by anything anyone can do for them
4. And death ends all chance at salvation...

Hebrews 4:7 God again set a certain day, calling it Today, when a long time later he spoke through David, as was said before: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."

2 Corinthians 6:2 For he says, "In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you." I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.

Hebrews 9:27 man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment

Rich man and Lazarus:

Luke 16:26 And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us

5. So... if Paul is not teaching a water baptism by the living to benefit the dead, then WHAT IS HE TEACHING?

C. First Answer... I Don't Know!

D. Possible Answer: John MacArthur

1. Paul is speaking of the effect on the living of those who have gone before us in the faith, have living exemplary lives and died well, filled with assurance in Christ
2. The Greek word "for" could be translated "in reference to"...
3. So it could be that Paul is talking about the powerful converting effect on the living of those who courageously lived for Christ before us... the unconverted saw them live, or heard of the accounts of them after they died and were so moved that they genuinely came to faith in Christ and were water baptized

4. Like the “cloud of witnesses” in Hebrews 11-12... men and women of faith who lived and died for Jesus

Hebrews 13:7 Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.

5. Another similar approach is to liken it to the converting effect dying relatives (like a godly father or mother) might have on an UNSAVED SON OR DAUGHTER... “if you want to see me in heaven, you will have to repent and be baptized into Christ on earth”... so MEET ME IN HEAVEN by genuine faith and baptism

My son Calvin’s nightmare: three statements: 1) I’ll be perfectly happy in heaven; 2) you’ll have a very difficult time on earth, but God will help you through it; 3) I’ll see you again!

BUT I didn’t add at that time, “If you are a Christian!” Imagine a dying parent begging an as yet unconverted but grown son or daughter... “If you ever want to see me again, you must believe!”

E. So... Faith in the Resurrection Has CONVERTING POWER in the lives of Lost People Who Watch Us or Come After Us

1. Paul’s point is this: if there is no resurrection from the dead, such an appeal would be null and void! We will never see loved ones again in any case!

II. Power to Endure Suffering for the Glory of Christ

1 Corinthians 15:30-32 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?

A. Paul Turns to His Own Example of Suffering for Christ

1. “We endanger ourselves EVERY HOUR”
2. I “DIE EVERY DAY” !!!

B. Paul Consistently Present Himself as a Role Model for Those that Follow Him

1 Corinthians 11:1 Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.

2 Corinthians 11:24-27 Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, ²⁶ I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. ²⁷ I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.

C. Paul's Courage Constantly in the Face of Death COMES FROM His Faith in the Resurrection!

1. He was ready... gladly ready... to die; to depart and be with Christ

Philippians 1:23 I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far

2. His faith in the resurrection from the dead enabled him to face even the howling winds and raging waves of a hurricane in the Mediterranean Sea that lasted for TWO WEEKS! He had absolutely no fear of death... or of living and facing trial before Caesar. Faith in Christ drove out all fear... but especially the great fear of death

Hebrews 2:14-15 [Jesus died] so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death-- that is, the devil-- ¹⁵ and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

John Wesley saw the fearlessness of a group of Moravian Christians during a severe storm in the Atlantic:

"In the midst of the psalm wherewith their service began, the sea broke over, split the main-sail in pieces, covered the ship, and poured in between the decks, as if the great deep had already swallowed us up. A terrible screaming began among the

[sailors]. The [Moravians] calmly sung on. I asked one of them afterwards, "Were you not afraid?" He answered, "I thank God, no." I asked, "But were not your women and children afraid?" He replied, mildly, "No; our women and children are not afraid to die."

3. This faith in the resurrection enables BOLD SERVICE to God from Christians all over the world

- a. During the days of the Roman persecution, our brothers and sisters in Christ died in the Coliseum with such otherworldly courage that they won many of the Roman citizens who watched them and transformed the world... Tertullian: the "blood of martyrs was seed for the church" only because they had no fear of death
- b. So also missionaries in the 19th century who packed their belongings in their own coffins and sailed to the disease-infested steamy jungles of west Africa, fully expecting their lifespan to be 18 months or less
- c. Or John Paton, who sailed with his wife in 1858 almost 16,000 nautical miles from the safety of Scotland to an island in the New Hebrides where the previous missionaries who landed on that same beach were immediately killed and eaten by cannibals in the full view of the ship that brought them. When a well-meaning Christian friend heard what Paton was planning on doing, he exclaimed "You'll be eaten by cannibals!"... John Paton gave one of the greatest answers in the annals of church history:

"Mr. Dickson, you are advanced in years now, and your own prospect is soon to be laid in the grave, there to be eaten by worms; I confess to you, that if I can but live and die serving and honoring the Lord Jesus, it will make no difference to me whether I am eaten by Cannibals or by worms; and in the Great Day my Resurrection body will rise as fair as yours in the likeness of our risen Redeemer."

Clearly John Paton's faith in the resurrection of the body freed him to serve Christ BOLDLY

D. Paul's Own Assertion: "Fought wild beasts in Ephesus"

1. Not sure exactly what this means... perhaps speaking of the wild crowd of fanatical pagans who shouted at the top of their lungs "GREAT IS ARTEMIS OF THE EPHESIANS" for two solid hours and who were ready to tear him limb from limb out of zeal for the goddess
2. In any case, Paul's reason for courage was his faith in the resurrection from the dead

E. Paul's Deepest Desire

1. Not to save his life... not to escape harm or danger... but to learn how to die for the glory of God and the salvation of others like Jesus did

Philippians 3:10-11 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

F. As Jesus Said

Matthew 16:25 For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.

III. Power to Live for Christ, Not Temporary Pleasures

1 Corinthians 15:32-34 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.

A. Paul's Life of Self-Denial and Facing Martyrdom for Christ MAKES NO SENSE if there is no resurrection from the dead!!

B. If there is no resurrection from the dead, only three courses make any sense

1. Pure hedonism... “eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die”
 2. Suicide... when there can be no more suitable enjoyment of pleasures
 3. Grim joyless endurance of life’s sorrows, then death
- C. This Sensual Indulgence is Exactly How Unbelievers Live the World Over
1. I have seen it in the hardworking people of Japan... who live for earthly achievement PLUS material rewards
 2. I have seen it in the MIT students I went to school with, who have built successful careers in engineering and research and who just want to be prosperous and enjoy life
 3. This hedonism is everywhere you look here in America... in the triangle... the comfortable life of material prosperity
- D. The Doctrine of the Resurrection Frees Us from a Life of Sensual Indulgence... Hedonism... Which Is Ultimately “Vanity of vanities”
1. The Book of Ecclesiastes is the life of worldly wisdom IF THERE IS NO RESURRECTION FROM THE DEAD

“Vanity of vanities... everything is vanity”

2. “Under the sun” ... the physical world is all there is
3. The Preacher did everything you can do under the sun to find meaning and happiness... and FAILED...
 - a. Intellectual achievement... great wisdom
 - b. Great building projects... cities, gardens, inventions
 - c. Material prosperity... gold, silver, jewels, wealth
 - d. Sensual indulgence... harems, beautiful women, wine

Ecclesiastes 1:14 I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

- E. Paul Seeks to WARN and SHAME the Corinthians... for this is exactly how they were living before the gospel came into their lives
1. They were living for the meat and the temple prostitutes and for the gold and fine things
 2. They turned away from all this to follow Christ to heaven by means of a holy life
 3. But now, they were turning back to hedonism again... because “BAD COMPANY CORRUPTS GOOD MORALS”
 4. Paul is shaming them back to a life of holiness and of service to the Kingdom of Christ

F. The Bible’s Answer to the Emptiness of Ecclesiastes

1 Corinthians 15:58 Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

IV. Applications

- A. See the Ethical Implications of a fervent belief in the resurrection
1. Embrace the concept that our doctrines truly do affect the way we live our daily lives
 2. Accept Paul’s basic connection here that belief in the resurrection from the dead will have a strong effect on the way you choose to spend your time, energy, money
 3. Push away all denigration of doctrine... as though “book learning” and strong doctrine is for the specialist and the egg-headed and not for everyone
- B. To the Unconverted: Look at the abundant evidence for the resurrection from the dead that Paul lays out in this chapter... I’m not sure if I got the interpretation of “baptism for the dead” right... but in one sense it doesn’t matter... what does matter is whether you yourself are forgiven of your sins and will rise again in glory because of your faith in Christ

C. Evaluate Your Own Life

1. Are you essentially living an American Christian version of “eat drink and be merry for tomorrow we die... and then we’ll go to heaven!”
2. We are all strongly tempted to “save our lives” in this world... to protect our interests... our money and possessions and health and security
3. The more we try to save our lives in this world, the more we will lose our souls to a gradual hardness of heart
4. If we live our whole lives like that, we will have very little fruit to show for the kingdom on Judgment Day

D. Live and Serve Christ BOLDLY based on the resurrection from the dead

1. Paul’s application of this truth was to be staggeringly bold for the gospel... willing to “fight wild beasts in Ephesus”
2. What “wild beasts” are you willing to fight?
3. Our secular culture has become more and more hostile to our faith... aggressive non-Christians are pouring open derision on Christians for their views on sexuality, and race, and the exclusivity of Christ and the sanctity of human life
4. Such screaming and hostility can be VERY INTIMIDATING...
5. Our belief in the resurrection from the dead should make us fearless in facing such hatred with a truly loving demeanor

E. Pray for the Persecuted Church

1. Pray for our brothers and sisters in North Korea... and China... and Iran... and other highly restrictive countries
2. Pray that they would not love their lives so much as to shrink from death

3. As you pray for them, pray as if you were fellow prisoners with them

F. Take Some Bold Steps for the Gospel

G. Persevere in Service to Christ in Whatever Pattern You Have

1 Corinthians 15:58 Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.