

Wrestling with Tough New Testament Texts

Lesson #1: 1 Corinthians 15:29

“Otherwise, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why then are they baptized for them?” (1 Cor 15:29)

1. What do you know about the book of 1 Corinthians? Do you know the theme or purpose of the book?
2. What did you learn from the context of 1 Corinthians 15? How would you boil down Paul’s primary argument in 1 Corinthians 15? How does Paul’s argument in 15:29-34 parallel 15:13-19?
3. Is there any significance to Paul’s use of questions throughout chapter 15 (e.g., 15:12, 29, 30, 32, 35, and 55)? Is the question in 15:29 rhetorical? If so, what is Paul attempting to say?
4. How should Paul’s first question be understood? Paul does not ask, “what are they doing…” but rather, “what will those do…” He is not talking about the present, but rather the future (i.e., the time of the resurrection). Note: The phrase in question can also be understood “What good will it do them?” (Cf. 15:32)
5. Why does Paul use the third person (“those”) in 15:29? Who are the people that Paul is referring to? Note: The pronoun “they” occurs seven times in this chapter (15:18, 23, 29, 29, 35, 48, 48). “They” refers to the dead (15:35), to the dead in Christ (15:18, 23), but never refers to the living.
6. Paul used the Greek verb *baptizo* 13 times (ten times in 1 Corinthians). He utilized the word with reference to Christian baptism eight times (six times in 1 Corinthians, excluding the two occurrences in 15:29). In the remaining three occurrences Paul used this term in a nonstandard way with reference to a believer being identified with Christ in His death (Rom 6:3), the Israelites being identified with Moses (1 Cor 10:2), and believers being identified with the Spirit of God (1 Cor 12:13).
7. Paul does not say that they “are being baptized,” but rather that they “are baptized.” That is, they are in the state of having been baptized.
8. What possible ways can the word “dead” be understood in a given context? Who is Paul referring to as “dead?” Note: Paul seems to have been distinguishing between the dead in general (15:12, 13, 15, 16, 20, 21, and 29b) and Christians who had died (15:29a, 35, 42, and 52).
9. What possible views can you see that could stem from this verse? What are the strengths and weaknesses of each view?
10. The Greek word translated “for” (*huper*) is the hinge pin of this problematic verse. The preposition can be translated with the sense of “in the place of” as in new believers being baptized to take the place of dead Christians. A second possibility translates *huper* with the final sense: “in order to be reunited with their loved ones at the resurrection.” A third view translates *huper* with the sense of “because of”: new believers being baptized “because of the influence of deceased Christians.”
11. How does Paul use this verse to argue for the reality of the resurrection?

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Lesson #2: 1 Timothy 3:2

“The overseer then must be above reproach, the husband of one wife...” (1 Tim 3:2)

1. Contextually, what is Paul discussing in 1 Timothy 3:1-7? How does 3:2a (“The overseer then must be above reproach,” NET) serve as a header statement for all that follows? How many qualities are included in 3:2-7? Are the qualities listed objective or subjective?
2. How do other English versions translate the phrase in question?
 - “The husband of one wife” (ASV, CSB, ESV, KJV, NASB, NET, NKJV, RSV, TNT, WEB)
 - “Husband of one wife” (NJB, DBY)
 - “The husband of but one wife” (NIV)
 - “He must have only one wife” (GWN)
 - “Married only once” (NRSV, NAB)
 - “Faithful to his one wife” (NEB)
 - “He must be faithful to his wife” (CJB, NLT, TNIV); “Committed to his wife” (The Message)
3. How is the above phrase used in other contexts? See 1 Tim 3:12 and Titus 1:6 (cf. 1 Tim 5:9, 14).
4. Does the Greek text shed any light on the phrase? First, the Greek phrase *mias gunaikos andra* can be literally translated “a husband of one wife,” “a man of one woman,” or “a one-woman man.” The English words translated “husband” (*aner*) and “wife” (*gune*) are Greek words that can be translated either “man/husband” or “woman/wife” depending upon the context. Koine Greek, the language of the NT does not have other words to distinguish between these two terms. Second, the Greek construction places emphasis on the word “one” (*mias*) thereby communicating the idea of a “one woman man.” It could be argued that this instead supports the idea of “one” wife for life under all circumstances, yet, the context argues against this. The stress is laid upon character, not marital status. Third, the nouns (“husband” and “wife”) are used without the definite article (“the”). Again, this construction emphasizes character or nature, hence the translation “a one-woman sort of man.” Though the absence of the article does not “prove” the translation, it certainly supports it.
5. Does church history help us? The historical evidence suggests that the church of this time was made up of those that had formerly been involved in all kinds of immorality. Even the early apostolic council in Jerusalem warns against “fornication” (*porneia*) and uses this wide term to cover all the prevalent pagan sexual excesses (Acts 15:29). Furthermore, there was the regular institution of pagan temple prostitutes and escorts. Converts to the gospel did not at once step into perfect sexual purity.
6. What are the various interpretations offered? The phrase most often translated “the husband of one wife” is frequently understood to refer to the marital status of the church leader. Thus, the phrase excludes from leadership those who are (1) unmarried, (2) polygamous, (3) divorced, or (4) remarried after being widowed.
7. Is Paul looking at the potential elder candidate in his present condition, since his conversion, or over his lifetime? What do the other qualifications suggest in this regard?
8. What conditions, if any, result in the dissolution of the marriage relationship besides death? Consider Matt 5:31-32; 19:3-12; Mark 10:2, 12; Luke 16:18; and 1 Cor 7:8-16, 25-28. Under what conditions, if any, does God permit Christians to remarry? See Matt 5:31-32; 19:2-12; and 1 Cor 7:15, 25-28.

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Lesson #3: Hebrews 6:4-6

“For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame.” (Heb 6:4-6)

1. Who does the author of Hebrews seem to be writing to (2:11; 3:1, 12; 10:19; 13:22 / 2:1; 3:6, 14; 6:3; 10:26; 12:25 / 4:15; 8:1; 10:10; 11:3; 12:20, 28; 13:6, 14)? Why is he writing this audience (see 2:1-4; 3:6, 12-15; 6:11-12; 10:23-25)? How does the preceding context (5:1-10) tie into this passage?
2. The word “therefore” (6:1) ties 5:11-14 into 6:1-12. How would you boil down the author’s primary argument in 5:11-6:12? What is the author’s primary exhortation (6:1)? What does he see as the danger his readers are facing (6:6a; cf. 6:1-2; 2:1-18; 3:12; 7:11-28; 10:1-18)? What are the accompanying consequences (6:7-8)?
3. What role does 6:1-3 play in understanding the Hebrew writer’s argument? What is the point of the principle found in 6:3? What does the word “this” refer to (see 6:1)?
4. Those who have “fallen away” are described by five participles in 6:4-6a. Each of these participles is governed by the article *tous* (“those who”). The use of the single article indicates that only one group of individuals is in view. Are these believers or unbelievers? They are said (1) to have once been enlightened (cf. 10:32; 2 Cor 4:3-6; Eph 1:18; 1 Pet 2:9); (2) to have tasted of the heavenly gift (cf. 2:9; 1 Pet 2:3; John 4:10; Rom 5:15, 17; Jas 1:17-18); (3) to have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit (cf. 1:9; 3:1, 14; 5:13; 7:13; 12:8); (4) to have tasted the good word of God; and (5) to have tasted the powers of the age to come (cf. 2:3-5).
5. What have the readers “fallen away” from (6:6; see 3:6, 14; 4:14; 10:23-25, 35-39)? How is the word “impossible” used in Hebrews (cf. 6:18; 10:14; 11:6)? Does this rule out God (Luke 18:27)?
6. Is the cursing and burning in 6:8 a reference to hell? Is eternal judgment the only judgment emphasized in the Scriptures? What does the ground represent? What do the thorns and thistles represent (cf. 1 Cor 3:12-15; 9:27). When the ground is burned, what is destroyed and what remains?
7. The Hebrew writer is “convinced of better things concerning you [the readers], and things that accompany salvation” (6:9). What does “salvation” refer to in Hebrews (1:14; 2:3, 10; 5:9; 9:27-28; cf. Rom 5:1, 10)? Does the “salvation” in this passage refer to salvation from sin (i.e., justification)?
8. The Hebrew writer encourages his readers to “show” diligence (6:11). The purpose of this demonstration is the full and final realization of hope. In 6:12 the purpose of the exhortation is that the readers not be “sluggish” (*nothros*). The same term is used in 5:11. Their “sluggishness” or “dullness” as a manifestation of their immaturity was to be replaced by diligence. In contrast they are to be imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises (see 6:13-20).
9. How does this passage motivate you to persevere in your Christian faith? How can you help others to persevere in their faith?

The Flip Side of Eternal Security

- We may fall into serious sin just as the children of Israel did after being delivered from Egypt (1 Cor 10:1-12).
- We may, because of continued, willful, unconfessed sin, lose our health, and even our life (1 Cor 11:30).
- We may lose future rewards (Col 2:18; 2 John 8; Rev 3:11).
- We may lose our spiritual influence (Ps 51:12-13; 1 Cor 9:27).
- We may lose the spiritual protection of the body of Christ (1 Cor 5:1-8)
- We may lose our good standing with fellow Christians (1 Cor 5:9-13).
- We may lose the approval of God (Rev 2:1-7).
- We may lose our love, joy, peace, and comfort in the Lord (Heb 12:1-11; Jas 3:13-17).
- We may lose our good conscience and confidence in prayer (1 John 3:20-23).