

‘Baptism for the Dead’:

Sermon Notes

Rev. Travis Fentiman

“Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? Why are they then baptized for the dead?”

1 Cor. 15:29

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Sermon Notes¹

1 Cor. 15:29

“Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? Why are they then baptized for the dead?”

What does it mean?

The N.T. scholar Leon Morris: “One of the most difficult passages in the N.T.”

Applications at the Outset:

1- Need for teachers in the church

Not all Scripture is easy to understand
Need Teachers, gifted, devoted to task
Contra the ‘me and my Bible’ mentality
Takes hundreds of years to hammer out doctrines
collective researches of body of teachers, sifting

2 – Takes hard work

Not for the lazy
Not all spiritual truth fits into a 144 character tweet

¹ Rev. Travis Fentiman is a Licentiate in the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) and earned an MDiv. from Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. He resides with his lovely bride and two dear children in Vermont, USA (2015). These notes have been revised and slightly expanded from how they were originally preached. The sermon originally occurred in a series of sermons on Christ through the books of Moses, just after Numbers 19.

3 – Humility in interpretation

Put ourselves below the text

- not eisegesis
- don't force conclusions

This sermon will be a lesson in how to interpret scripture

Context

The General Context: 1 Cor. 15 – The Resurrection

- This is the heart of the gospel
- Some denied it
- Proved by:
 - Christ Resurrection, v.13
 - If Christ not is not raised:
 - Your faith is in vain, yet in your sins, v.14
 - Dead Christians have perished, v. 18
 - If there is only this life, we are most miserable, v. 19
 - Our union to Christ implies our resurrection, v. 20
 - Christ is the firstfruits
 - We will be raised at Second Coming,
after all enemies put down, death

The Specific Context: Verse 29

A break from the last several verses

Continues line of arguments for the resurrection

This verse is a new argument: the baptism for the dead

Verses 30-32 contain another argument:

‘Why stand we in jeopardy every hour?’

Paul’s physical and spiritual sufferings

In hope of Resurrection

If there is no Resurrection:

Why not eat and drink and then die? v.32

The Verse

No dispute on what the Greek says

Good English translation

Literally: ‘Baptized for the dead’

4 Questions:

Who is being baptized?

What is ‘Baptism’?

What does ‘For’ mean?

Who are the ‘Dead’?

Possible Answers:

Who – All people, Christians, some Christians, non-Christians,
Jews, Gentiles, heretics

Baptism (baptism in Greek simply means washing) – Non religious, Religious,
Christian, pagan, water, blood, Holy Spirit, Figurative,
metaphorical

‘For’ (The hardest word) – For, Because of, Over, In place of, Against, For the
benefit of, Beyond, In view of, Reckoned as

Dead (The Greek is plural) – Dead bodies, Death, All dead people, dead Christians, the dying, dying Christians, spiritual death

Possible Views:

Number of Possible Combinations of the terms: 3,402

But most possibilities would not make logical sense

A dissertation on this verse:

Only 220 interpretations put forward in Church history

Every commentator seems to have a different view

Overview of the Different Views and their Weaknesses:

3 Main Categories of Interpretations:

- 1 – Vicarious Baptism
- 2 – Christian Baptism for New Believers
- 3 – Metaphorical Baptism

This is the order we will proceed:

- Start with least likely and work towards more likely
- None have any historical evidence
Except one, dealt with at the end...

Main Interpretations

1 – Views that rearrange the grammar and punctuation of the sentence

Weakness:

- Such views are even more unlikely. There is no other construction of the Greek phrase and context that makes sense.

2 - ‘Baptized on behalf of the dead’

Vicarious Baptism (one is baptized in place of someone else)

- *Paul is approving of it:*

Mormons

Persons on earth are baptized in behalf of persons who have died

Weakness – This view theologically implies:

- baptismal regeneration
- a second chance at salvation after death

- *Paul is disapproving of it:*

Paul is not approving of the practice, but uses it as evidence of the resurrection

Vicarious baptism was done by heretics in early church history:

The Marcionites and Cerentians practiced it in A.D. 150

This is the view of most Christian, liberal and secular scholars

Weaknesses:

- The Marcionites and other 2nd century heretics are too late to serve as evidence for what was happening during Paul’s day. On the contrary, they probably derived their practice from this erroneous interpretation of this verse.

- Paul brings up a wrong practice without condemning it? Paul rebukes them often for other lesser problems in the letters to the Corinthians
- That would make this *ad hominem* argument only of force on the opponents' grounds. But Paul is not speaking to heretics, but Christians. How would using the example of heretics persuade Christians? The argument would then be: "For what purpose do Mormons baptize their dead if there is no Resurrection?" Who cares what Mormons or other heretics do?
- For the *ad hominem* argument to make coherent sense, it takes a paragraph or more of explanation.² Such an assumed paragraph of detailed argument imposed into this short verse by silence, no doubt, would be (and is) lost on the reader.

3 – 'They' = those who denied the Resurrection at Corinth

'Why are they baptized in view of death?'

'If there is no resurrection, then why are those who deny it baptized?'

An *ad hominem* argument to show the absurdity of denying the resurrection

Weaknesses:

- Paul refers to them in v. 12 as 'some among you', not in the 3rd person plural, as here
- This makes a long and unlikely jump from v. 12 to v. 29

4 – 'Baptized over graves'

Some in church history baptized converts over graves due to this interpretation

Weaknesses:

² For example, see Augustus Toplady, *Works*, vol. 3, p. 418

- Is Paul approving of a man made tradition that adds a religious significance to baptism? Gal. 4:9-11; Col. 2:20-23
- Makes two categories of baptism: (1) regular Christian baptism, and (2) baptism over graves. Yet according to Eph. 4:5, there is “One Lord, one faith, one baptism”

5 – ‘Baptized on account of dead martyrs’

Unbelievers see martyrs die and are converted by their testimony

Weakness:

- There is no evidence that persecution was going on at the time of 1 Corinthians. Any assertion of such is purely hypothetical and is without evidence.

6 – ‘Baptized in order to be united to the dead at the Resurrection’

Unbelievers see loved ones die, want to be with them after death, and so are baptized

Weakness:

- This view relies on a whole phrase that is not in the text: ‘in order to be united... at the Resurrection,’ which is an argument from silence.
- Nor is there any evidence of persecution at the time, that large numbers of Christians were dying dramatically.

7 – ‘Baptized at the point of death’

Baptizing persons at the point of death has been a practice in church history.

Weakness:

- This often involved the erroneous assumption that baptism forgave only the sins up to the point of one’s baptism, and so persons delayed baptism till the point of death.

A form of this was John Calvin's view:

Persons were dying and despaired of any good in this life, thus they desired to convert and be baptized.

Weakness:

- The context of 1 Cor. 15 is literal death, not 'dying'

8 – 'Some are baptized in view of impending death'

Some are baptized as their lives are in jeopardy due to persecution, and they desire eternal life.

Weakness:

- If this was so, Paul would have included himself in this category, per v. 30, but he does not.

9 – 'All Christians are baptized in view of the grave'

A major motivation to receive baptism and eternal life is due to the certainty of death and the hope of the Resurrection.

Weakness:

- Paul uses the 3rd person plural, 'they', which excludes himself and implies he is speaking of only a subset of Christians. If he had meant all Christians, he would have said, 'we'.

10 – 'All Christians are baptized into spiritual death'

Scripture interprets Scripture: Rom. 6:3,4:

'Know ye not that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into His death? Therefore we are buried with Him by baptism into death.'

Weaknesses:

- Paul uses the 3rd person plural. This does not include himself, but implies a subset of Christians. This is deliberate as there is specifically a change in pronouns in v. 30 to the 1st person plural, 'we'.

- This interpretation spiritualizes death, which is an equivocation in the chapter's context of speaking of the literal dead.

11 – 'Baptized by blood into death'

'Else, why are martyrs willing to be baptized by blood into death if there be no Resurrection?'

This view uses 'baptism' figuratively

See Mk. 10:38 and Luke 12:50 for a figurative use of 'baptism'

Weaknesses:

- The verb 'baptize' is a present participle which typically denotes ongoing action, but there is no evidence of persecution at that time
- While Jesus used 'baptism' in a figurative sense on occasion; Paul did not.

12 – 'Baptized into physical and spiritual sufferings'

This view uses 'baptism' and 'the dead' figuratively

See Mt. 20:22,23 for such a figurative use of 'baptism'

This view of 'the dead' fits the context of the immediately following verses of 1 Cor. 15:30-32

Weaknesses:

- 'baptism' is not used figuratively by Paul
- 'the dead,' being used figuratively, is an equivocation in the context of the whole chapter where it is consistently used of the physical dead.
- There is a change of pronouns in verses 29-30, which marks off different thoughts in 'baptism for the dead' in v. 29 versus Paul's physical and spiritual sufferings in vv. 30-32. Hence, there is not a continuity of argument between these verses.

One last view to consider:

- The most persuasive view is reserved for last
- We have looked at the passage **negatively**: what it doesn't mean.
Let's look at it **positively**

The *Prima Facie* (first look) reading of the text:

Who? – These are faithful people, not heretics
Paul is not disapproving of the practice

“They” – This is in the 3rd person plural
It is not singular and hence does not include Paul
Paul does not say ‘you all’, to all the Corinthians
He does not say ‘we all’, that is, all Christians
He is speaking of a subset of people

The verb is a present participle, ‘being baptized’
One shouldn't make too much of this; the verb can have a timeless aspect
But we should expect it was a present ongoing action during Paul's day

‘The dead’ is plural
The context of 1 Cor. 15 is physical dead bodies

V. 29 is an independent argument from v. 30
There is a change of pronouns
V. 29 is not speaking of Paul's spiritual and physical sufferings

‘Baptism’ means a washing
This normally means a physical washing. One should only take it as
figurative if one has to due to context.

Paul's whole context is a religious washing, not a secular washing
This would normally be assumed to be with water, not blood

Washing with water symbolizes cleansing from death

Paul is approving of this baptism

As such, the baptism cannot be a man-made tradition, Gal. 4:9-11;
Col. 2:20-23, but must be approved of God in Scripture

This is not Christian Baptism

- Otherwise it would make 2 categories of Christian baptism: (1) regular Christian Baptism, and (2) another category of Christian baptism by a subset group of Christians who are baptized for the dead. On the contrary, there is ‘One Lord, one faith, one baptism.’
- Rather, this baptism is qualified and denoted as something different and specific from regular Christian baptism by a clear qualifying phrase; this baptism is not regular Christian baptism, but ‘baptism for the dead.’

What is the **only view** that **fits all of these contextual factors**?

What is the physical washing with water for dead bodies that is approved by Paul and is in Scripture? There is only one answer:

Numbers 19 – The Washing of the Ashes of the Red Heifer

Description

This was a very unique sacrifice and washing on many counts

Was uniquely given to Israel after all the other Levitical laws

It was the only one provided to make persons who had touched dead bodies clean

Persons who had touched dead bodies or associated items became unclean, as they ritually had come into fellowship with, and come under the curse of, death
A red female cow was to be burned outside of the camp
Its ashes were to be mixed with running water in a vessel
The ashes were then sprinkled on the persons who had become unclean due to contact with a dead body
If such a person did not use the provided sacrifice, they would be cut off, as the dead cannot have fellowship with the Living God

Arguments:

- This sacrifice was going on in Paul's day (A.D. 40's) in Israel, as the Temple and its services were still standing in Israel until A.D. 70. Hence Paul uses the present participle verb to denote what was a continuously occurring phenomenon. The verbal tense can also denote something timeless (something not confined to one time), as the sacrifice of the red heifer had been going on for over 1,400 years, throughout numerous generation.
- This is the only view that has any positive, historical evidence that it was happening in Paul's Day.
- Paul, by using the third person plural ('they') in 1 Cor. 15:29, is referring to a third party, namely persons in Israel, and hence does not include himself as the red heifer sacrifice was only available to persons within the land of Israel.
- This view keeps v. 29 as an argument for the Resurrection distinct from that of v. 30 ff. as there is the contextual signal of a change of pronouns.
- There is no unnecessary figurative interpretation of words, as there are no such relevant contextual signals for such.
- This view is approved by Paul, as it was prescribed by Scripture and was done by faithful persons in the covenant of many generations. As temple ceremonies were allowed (though not necessary) to Jewish Christians between the time of Christ's Resurrection and the destruction of the Temple (in A.D.

70), the persons keeping the ritual in Israel during Paul's day were faithful people in the Covenant.

- The sacrifice of the red heifer is implicitly called a physical 'washing,' or 'baptism' in the Greek, in Heb. 9:10
- 'Baptism for the dead' only occurs in one place in the NT, and hence appears to be an exceptional thing that happened then but not now, as it is nowhere else mentioned or emphasized in the N.T. Therefore it seems the practice has been done away, as opposed to being currently continued in the church age. If it were to mean Christian baptism (one of the next best alternatives), you would expect this idea of 'baptism for the dead' to figure more prominently in the NT.
- This washing by the ashes of a red heifer was a picture of life from the dead: the Resurrection
 - The ancient Jews interpreted Num. 19 to be a picture of the Resurrection.³
 - This sacrifice was given to Israel after all the other Levitical laws only AFTER the whole nation had been sentenced to die in the wilderness within 40 years (Num. 14) and after Korah's rebellion which killed Korah and his whole company and 14,700 other men by the plague (Num. 16). Now they had to get rid of the dead bodies.
 - After being defiled by death and cut off from God, the people had to be made pure by the interceding priest and made symbolically alive.
 - The person was to be cleansed by the water both on the 3rd day and the 7th day (Num. 19:12). Why on the 3rd day?
 - According to a leading orthodox Jewish commentator: this circumstance was "inexplicable on any natural or moral ground"⁴

³ See John Gill, *Commentary* on 1 Cor. 11:29

- The number ‘3’ is not significant in the Torah
But it is later in the Canon

- For Jonah three days in the whale’s belly (Jon. 1:17)
 - For Israel’s restoration from spiritual deadness and as an eschatological prophecy (Hos. 6:2)
 - For Christ 3 days in the grave: of the Resurrection
- This sacrifice had a physical teaching as well as that of spiritual cleansing:
- The sacrifice was for physical defilement and physical acceptance to life.
 - Persons would come back from funerals at the graveyard to be washed. All these people coming back from graves were made ritually alive

Each person would inevitably be defiled, and hence cleansed, several times throughout their life

- Here was a picture of being made alive after death: of the Resurrection. Here is hope for after the grave.

“Else, what shall they do which are washed because of the dead, if the dead rise not at all? Why are they then washed because of the dead?”

⁴ Joseph Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs: Hebrew Text English Translation and Commentary* (1929-36). Hertz (1872-1946) was one of the most important orthodox rabbis in England during the first half of the 20th century.

3 Objections:

Objection 1: The context of 1 Cor. 15 refers only to dead believers, not to the dead generally

Response:

- No, the context refers both to dead believers and to the dead generally
See 1 Cor. 15:21,22,26,32

Objection 2: The original hearers would not have been familiar with such an obscure passage as Num. 19

Response:

- Paul was familiar with it:
 - He sat at the feet of Gamaliel and was a Pharisee of the Pharisees
 - If Paul went to a funeral, he was sprinkled by the Red Heifer
- The Corinthians were familiar with it:
 - Though many were Gentiles at Corinth, some were Jews (Acts 18:1,4,8). Ask a Jew what 'washing for the dead' means and you will get only one answer
 - Paul expected his hearer to be familiar with "don't muzzle an ox" (1 Cor. 9:9). This was a very obscure passage in from Deut.
 - If they were unsure what Paul was referring to, they could look it up in the scriptures

Objection 3: Paul almost always means Christian baptism when speaking of 'baptism'

Response:

- That would be true if Paul simply said 'baptism', but he qualifies it by special designation, saying, 'baptism for the dead'

There are many different types of baptisms in Scripture, all specified of differently:

Christian baptism (Mt. 28:19; Acts 2:37-41)

The baptism of repentance (Acts 19:4)

The baptism of John (Acts 9:3)

Baptism with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5)

Baptism of fire (Lk. 3:16)

Jesus' personal baptism to death "the baptism that I am baptized with" (Mt. 20:22-23)

Baptized unto Moses (1 Cor. 10:2)

The baptism of regeneration (Titus 3:5)

Baptism for the dead (1 Cor. 15:29)

- Christian baptism is not in the context of 1 Cor. 15
 - No reason to assume this is what Paul is referring to
 - The Context is the dead, and a baptism for the dead

A Summary of the Red Heifer View

- This interpretation is grammatically possible
 - 'for', the hardest Greek word, falls right into place
- It fits the *prima facie* reading of the passage
- It is the only view that fits all the contextual factors
- This view fits the present tense of the verb, the pronoun 'they' (which refers to a subset of people), it recognizes that the shift of pronouns indicating that v. 29 is a separate argument from v. 30 and unnecessary figurative language is not used without textual indications.
- This view is in line with being approved by Paul
- The sacrifice of the red heifer is called a 'baptism' in Heb. 9:10
- It is the only view that has positive historical evidence for the practice of it in Paul's day. This view doesn't rely on unknown historical circumstances like most other views.
- This washing was something the original hearers would have been familiar with

- Paul explicitly designated what type of washing he is speaking of, by qualifying it as the ‘washing for the plural dead’
- This verse is exceptional in the N.T. and hence it is probably speaking of something that was a historical circumstance or is done away with, as opposed to the ongoing significance of regular, Christian baptism.
- The Holy Spirit gives the meaning for the ‘baptism for the dead’ in Num. 19:
 - Scripture interprets scripture
 - The meaning is preserved in the Canon for whole Church
 - The whole church can and should be familiar with it. If one is unsure: search the scriptures.
- This is the ONLY physical washing for dead bodies in Scripture.
- This reference to Num. 19 is not simply an argument for the Resurrection, it is, and was intended as, a beautiful Holy Spirit given picture of the Resurrection, and the Jews recognized it as such:

Paul is saying:

“If there is no Resurrection, then what is Num. 19 for? If there is no Resurrection, why are people washed on account of dead corpses? What else does Num. 19 mean?”

The need for humility:

- It is better to leave the question open than to answer it wrongly
 - The text is unclear and there are many other grammatically possible options.
- While a handful of interpreters have advocated for the red heifer interpretation of ‘baptism for the dead’,⁵ one should be cautious when there is not a majority consensus of interpretation in Church history.⁶

⁵ Robert L. Dabney (1820-98) and James B. Ramsay (1814-71), leading American Southern presbyterians, both took this view (see Dabney, *Discussions*, vol. 5, pp. 184-7; Ramsey wrote the commentary on Revelation, chapters 1-11, in the Geneva Series of Commentaries published by the Banner of Truth). Other proponents of it included the Dutch Bible scholars Johannes Cocceius (1603-1669) and Salomon Van Till (1643-1713). Heinrich Ewald (1803-75) the German Bible scholar, also took this view.

⁶ It should be noted that the reason that this view has not been immensely popular is probably not because its inherent merit is not persuasive, but because interpreters often come to the verse with no idea of

There is something more in Num. 19:

- All Israel was involved in this ritual cleansing
 - It was a continuous rite and would have been being done everyday in society
 - The whole nation partook in this living picture of life beyond death

- Israel as a nation was a walking, living picture of Christ
 - Israel is called 'My Son' in Hos. 11:1, because Christ was their head
 - Israel was in union to Him
 - Israel was the believing Church, Christ's body in the OT

 - Hence, the prophecy of Israel being given life from the dead was a type of Christ's life giving Resurrection (Hosea 6:2)

Israel was a picture of Christ who is the Resurrection and the Life

And if Christ, the head, be raised from the dead
how much more will we who are Israel, His body? (1 Cor. 15:22-23)

“Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? Why are they then baptized for the dead?”

what it may mean, coupled with there being so many views (30+ off-hand) that many interpreters do not even mention this view and are probably unaware of it. Considering that this view takes its foundation from a whole chapter in the O.T. that is directly relevant to the question, and that the reference to Numbers 19 would naturally occur to any who knows Old Testament regulations well, may it not be surmised that one of the major reasons this view is largely unknown (and hence unpopular) is because people do not know their Bibles well-enough?