

Sermon 1 Corinthians 15:29-34

1. What is meant by “baptised for the dead”

a. What it does not mean

- i. That it is possible for a dead person to receive any benefit from any actions of a living person
 1. One of the heretical teaching of the catholic church is the notion of purgatory-- a type of intermediate holding tank for people who were not bad enough to be condemned to hell but not good enough to immediately be united with Christ after death
 - a. Leveraging this this doctrine the Catholic church sold “Indulgences” on the promise that if you bought one you could get a loved one out of purgatory sooner
 2. The same logic applies to the Christian heresy advocated by Cerinth and Marcion that a living person can be baptized and have the benefits of that Baptism applied to a deceased person
 - a. This false teaching still rears its ugly head in the cult of Mormonism where it is thought that the spirits of those who have died cannot enter heaven unless a mormon is baptized for them by proxy
- ii. The reason this teaching is false is because nowhere does the bible teach that baptism is in any way salvific -- that is to say baptism does not save us, the act of baptism does not regenerate us. And so if baptism does not save a living person it is false to believe that it could save a dead person.
 1. We must also take into account that the bible does not teach us of any intermediary state.
 - a. Hebrew 9:27 tells us that it is appointed unto man once to die and then the judgment
 - b. Paul tells this same group of people in 2 Cor 5:8 that to be absent from the body for a christian is to be present with the Lord.

b. What it might mean - two possibilities

- i. The first possibility- If we take a straightforward reading of our english translations we can reason from the logic of the passage that there were some people who were teaching this baptism on behalf of the dead and it would follow that Paul is saying “if there is no resurrection, why are there those among you who are being baptized for those who will not rise again?”
- ii. The second possibility has to do with a variant rendering of the text.
 1. First we look at our understanding of the word baptism and is used in scripture. It is used often in a way synonymous with salvation

- a. In the Great Commission Jesus told his followers to go out into the world and make disciples, baptising them - not meaning their baptism saved them but that it was an evidence of their conversion. Eph 4:4-5 emphasises the singularity of the elements of or salvation
- 2. The word translated “for” in english is the greek preposition ὑπὲρ (hu-pear) and it is used to convey some twelve relationships between two things.
 - a. So this could be translated “For” the dead, “on behalf of,” “over” “above” “across” “beyond” “instead of” “in the name of” “because of” “in reference to” “in regard to”
- 3. The two relationships that make sense here are the relationship that benefits the dead person (for, on behalf of) and then the best understanding is the first one mentioned but if we take this preposition to refer to the benefit of the one being baptized the relationship is causal and would be rendered “because of” the dead.
- 4. If we understood this text to say “ what do we do with those who have been saved because of the dead” This reading would coincide with many of our life experience- many of us have seen a christian face death and because that believer faced death with resurrection hope our life- and for many of us our eternity- have been changed
 - a. let me read you as a story to illustrate this point - it comes from the time of the Finnish-Rushian War in the winter of 1939.

It was written by an eminent engineer in Finland by the name of Nordenberg, who gives us his first person account. This is what he said, “I offered my services to the government and was appointed an officer in General Mannerheim’s army. It was a terrible time! We had besieged a town that had been taken by the Red Army, and we overtook it.

“A number of Red prisoners were under my guard and seven of them were to be shot at dawn on Monday. I will never forget the preceding day. The seven men were kept in the basement of the Town Hall, and in the passage, my men stood at attention with their rifles. The atmosphere was filled with hatred. My soldiers were drunk with success and taunted their prisoners. Some swore and beat on the walls with their bleeding fists. Others called for their wives and children who were far away, because they knew at dawn they were all to die.

“We had the victory, that was true enough, but the value of it seemed to diminish as the night advanced. Then something strange happened. One of the men doomed to death began to sing. ‘He is mad’ was everyone’s first thought, but I had noticed that this man, whose name was Koskinen, had not raved and cursed. Quietly, he sat on his bench. Nobody said anything to him; each was carrying his burden in his own way. Koskinen sang, rather waveringly at first; and then

his voice grew stronger and became natural and free, and all the prisoners turned and looked at him as he sang these words: 'Safe in the arms of Jesus/Safe on His gentle breast/There by His love o'er-shaded/Sweetly my soul shall rest./Hark it's the voice of angels/Borne in a song to me/Over the fields of jasper/Over the crystal sea.'

"Over and over again, he sang that verse, and when he had finished, everyone was quiet for a few minutes, and then a wild-looking man broke out and said, 'Where did you get that, you fool? Are you trying to make us religious?'"

"Koskinen looked at his comrades with tear-filled eyes, as quietly he said, 'Comrades, will you listen to me for a minute? You asked me where I got this song; it was from the Salvation Army. I heard it three weeks ago. My mother sang of Jesus and prayed to Him often.'

"He stopped a little while, as if to gather strength, and then he rose to his feet, being the soldier that he was and looked straight in front of him and said, 'It's cowardly to hide your beliefs. The God my mother believed in is now my God. I can't tell how it happened, but last night, as I lay awake, I suddenly saw mother's face before me. It reminded me of the song I had heard. I felt I had to find the Savior and hide in Him. I prayed that Christ would forgive me and cleanse my sinful soul and make me ready to stand before Him.

"It was a strange night. There were times when everything seemed to shine around me. Verses from the Bible and the song book came to mind. It was God's answer to my prayer. I couldn't keep it to myself. Within a few hours, I shall be with the Lord, but saved by His grace!"

"Koskinen's face shone as if by an inward light. His comrades sat quietly. He himself stood transfixed. My soldiers were listening to what this Red Revolutionary had to say. 'You're right, Koskinen,' said one of his comrades at last. 'If only I knew there was mercy for me, too; but these hands of mine have shed blood, and now I have reviled God and trampled on all that is holy. And I realize there is a hell, and that's the proper place for me!' And he sank to the ground in despair. 'Pray for me, Koskinen,' and he groaned, 'Tomorrow I shall die, and my soul will be in the hands of the Devil!'

"These two Red soldiers went down to their knees and prayed for each other. It was no long prayer, but it reached heaven, and we who listened to it forgot our hatred. It melted in the light of heaven, for here were two men who were soon to die, seeking reconciliation with their God.

"The change in the atmosphere was indescribable. Some of the men sat on the floor, some on the benches; some wept quietly, and others talked of spiritual things. None of us had a Bible, but the Spirit of God was speaking to all of us.

“The night was almost gone, and the day was dawning. No one had slept a moment. ‘Sing the song once more for us, Koskinen, said one of them,’ and you should have heard them sing – not only that song, but verses and choruses long forgotten. The soldiers on guard united with them, for the power of God had touched everyone. Everything changed, and the venerable Town Hall basement resounded in the early morning hour with the songs of the blood of the Lamb.

The clock struck six, and how I wished I could beg mercy for these men, but knew it was impossible. Between two rows of soldiers, they marched out to the place of execution. One of them asked to be allowed to sing Koskinen’s song once again, and permission was granted. And then they asked to be allowed to die with uncovered faces. And so, with hands lifted to heaven, they sang with might and main, ‘Safe in the arms of Jesus.’ And when the last line had died out, the lieutenant gave the word ‘Fire’ and we clenched our heads in silent prayer.

“What happened in the hearts of the others I don’t know, but as far as I was concerned, I saw a new man – I was a new man from that hour. I had met Christ in one of His loveliest and youngest disciples, and I had seen enough to realize that I, too, could be His!”

I leave it up to your mind which is being renewed by the spirit to decide to which of how best to understand this obscure and difficult passage. I do hope you will see from scripture that the bible does not teach the practice of baptism of the dead. Perhaps you will see it context of the passage and conclude that Paul is simple pointing out that this practice, which he is not condoning, is inconsistent with the idea that there is no resurrection of the dead. Perhaps you are persuaded that Paul is drawing attention to the fact that when christians face death with resurrection hope is has an effect on those around them which produces in them a desire to be reconciled to Jesus.

Regardless of your conclusion, I pray you will live your life in such a way that others may see your good works and glorify your father who is in heaven