

“Baptized for the Dead”

“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?”
—*I Corinthians 15:29*

THE DOCTRINE OF BAPTISM is one of the basic tenets of Christian belief. It is proper that it be considered such, since the Apostle Paul identifies it as one of the “principles of the doctrine of Christ.” (Heb. 6:1,2) In its various forms, the word “baptism” appears over one hundred times in the New Testament. Yet, for all its usage in Scripture, the understanding of this important teaching varies widely among professed believers in Christ. One verse which speaks of baptism has especially puzzled many for centuries. It is the statement of Paul found in our opening text, and in particular the phrase which appears twice in that verse, “baptized for the dead.”

Various explanations of this phrase have been offered. Some church historians claim that John Calvin interpreted it as a reference to being baptized shortly before death. Martin Luther is said to have believed it should be translated “baptized

above the tombs of the dead.” Still others claim that the mention of baptism in this verse refers to the ritual washings which were required of Jews under the Mosaic law in the case of contact with a dead body. The most commonly known interpretation of these words is that given by various factions of Mormonism, which view the rite of baptism as an indispensable requirement to enter the kingdom of God. Their belief states that baptism for the dead can be offered by “proxy” to those who have died without the opportunity to receive it themselves. Ironically, it is also taught that those who have died may choose to either accept or reject the baptism done on their behalf.

None of these explanations of our text are satisfactory to the sincere student of the Bible. How are we, though, to properly interpret Paul’s words? What did he mean by the phrase, “baptized for the dead,” especially in view of the fact that he repeats it a second time in the verse? Like many other Scriptures which may at first appear very puzzling, the key to correctly understanding these words of the apostle is found in the context in which they appear—in this case, the entire 15th chapter of I Corinthians. We believe the context of this chapter provides not only a correct understanding of what Paul meant by the words of our text, but also enlightens us concerning the important doctrines of death and resurrection.

PAUL’S TESTIMONY

Few will deny that the entire human race is either dead or dying. Paul explains that this began with the first man, Adam: “By man came death . . . in

Adam all die.” (I Cor. 15:21,22) Adam’s death came as a result of his disobedience to divine law. All his progeny have inherited to one extent or another the sinful nature to which he fell, and all have consequently suffered the same penalty—death. As the psalmist says, “In sin did my mother conceive me.” (Ps. 51:5) Paul confirms the end result of this by saying that the “wages of sin is death.”—Rom. 6:23

The Scriptures, however, provide a wonderful hope for man’s ultimate recovery from sin and death. The 15th chapter of I Corinthians presents the assurance that the dead will be restored to life by means of a resurrection. Paul explains why this is so: “Since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead.” (vs. 21, *New American Standard Bible*) Here we are reminded that just as it was by a fallen man—Adam—that death came about, it is by a perfect man—Christ Jesus—that the resurrection of the dead is made possible. Jesus redeemed the world from Adamic death, which is in keeping with his own words when he said that he would give his flesh “for the life of the world.” (John 6:51) Thus as “in Adam” all have died, “in Christ” all will “be made alive.” (I Cor. 15:22) That is, all will be given the opportunity to be restored to perfect, everlasting human life based on obedience to divine law, the same conditions under which Adam lived before he sinned.

“A RANSOM FOR ALL”

The apostle used the word “ransom” to describe the means by which God’s plan for the recovery of man from the condemnation of death is accomplished. He wrote, “This is good and acceptable in

the sight of God our Saviour; Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; Who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.”—I Tim. 2:3-6

The Greek word in the New Testament which is translated ransom signifies “a price to correspond.” The man Christ Jesus was, as the Scriptures declare, “holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners.” (Heb. 7:26) In this way he “corresponded” to the perfect man Adam, who was created in God’s image. However, Adam lost that perfection and brought death upon himself and upon all his descendants through transgression of divine law. The perfect man Jesus gave himself voluntarily in sacrificial death, and in so doing he was a “price to correspond” which provided redemption for Adam and the entire human race—all “in Adam.” This provision of the ransom opened the way for all to return to life.

As quoted earlier, Paul said, “The wages of sin is death,” but then adds, “the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” (Rom. 6:23) A similar thought is expressed in John 3:16,17: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.”

Jesus further explained, “He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.” (vs. 18) These texts reveal that the whole world, by

heredity, is under condemnation to death, and that escape from this condemnation has been provided through Christ. They further tell us that this escape depends upon the faith and acceptance by the individual of this provision which has been made for him.

During this present age, those who, on learning about this provision of God's grace, accept it upon the conditions of obedience and full dedication to do God's will, are said to be "justified." Paul wrote, "Being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." (Rom. 5:1) Those who have not come to Christ in full faith, and by a complete dedication of their lives to do the will of God by following in the footsteps of Jesus, do not enjoy this "peace with God." These are still alienated from him through sin—still under condemnation to death.

There is no other way of salvation from death than through Christ. Speaking of Jesus, Peter said, "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved." (Acts 4:12) The reason there is no salvation from death except through Jesus is that he is the only one who shed his perfect human blood on behalf of the sin-cursed and dying race. Shed blood is, in the Scriptures, a symbol of life poured out, and Jesus "poured out his soul unto death," that all of Adam's children might have an opportunity to live.—Isa. 53:12

When we accept by faith the provisions of Christ's shed blood, and devote ourselves to the divine will, we find that there is more to it than merely believing. Paul wrote, "Unto you it is given

in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake.” (Phil. 1:29) There are many Scriptures to indicate that it is the privilege of believers to suffer with Jesus. In his letter to Timothy, Paul wrote, “It is a faithful saying: For if we be dead with him, we shall also live with him: If we suffer, we shall also reign with him.”—II Tim. 2:11,12

“FOR THE DEAD”

Turning again to the words of our opening text, Paul appropriately mentions this aspect of the divine will for all consecrated believers in connection with his discussion of the resurrection of the dead. There were apparently some in the church at Corinth who did not believe in the resurrection of Jesus, and he points out that if Christ be not raised from the dead then there is no hope that any of the dead will be restored to life. He shows, on the other hand, not only that Jesus has been raised from the dead, but that all through him will be restored to life.—I Cor. 15:12-22

The apostle shows clearly that this will be accomplished by Christ’s kingdom rulership, that he will reign until all enemies are put under his feet, and that even death itself will be destroyed. When that glorious work is complete the kingdom will be turned over to the Father, that he “may be all in all.”—vss. 24-28

It is in this context that Paul then adds the words of our text, “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?” To further emphasize his point, the apostle adds that if

the dead rise not, “Why stand we in jeopardy every hour? I protest by your rejoicing which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die daily. If after the manner of men I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, what advantageth it me, if the dead rise not? let us eat and drink; for to morrow we die.”—I Cor. 15:30-32

These verses remind us that consecrated believers during the present age—those striving to follow in Jesus’ footsteps of sacrifice—suffer and “die daily” with him. This, Paul explains, is on behalf of the world of mankind, presently “dead” in God’s sight. The apostle indicates that the dead will benefit, in some manner and in God’s due time, from the sufferings and death of the followers of Jesus. This is one of the important features of God’s grand design for giving life to the world of mankind. It is brought to our attention in a number of ways in the Scriptures, one of those being through the promise which God made to Abraham, that through his seed “all families of the earth” would “be blessed.”—Gen. 12:3; 22:18

In Galatians 3:16, Paul identifies the promised seed of Abraham as being Christ Jesus. He then adds, “As many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. . . . And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.” (vss. 27-29) Here it is clearly shown that those who are baptized into Christ and who are faithful, will inherit with him the promise of blessing the families of the earth. Since these families of the earth which are to be blessed are either already dead or dying, it is logical to think of those who are thus “baptized into Christ” as being

“baptized for the dead.” That is, those “baptized into Christ” and fully developed into his character likeness during the present age, are also “baptized,” symbolically speaking, with a view toward helping the dead and dying world. It is through this further process of being “baptized for the dead” that consecrated believers are developed to be part of a sympathetic priesthood, “touched with the feeling” of mankind’s infirmities, and tested by experiences which are “common to man.” (Heb. 4:15; I Cor. 10:13) Thus, they are proven worthy of and prepared for that great future work of blessing all the families of the earth.

BAPTISM FURTHER EXPLAINED

The water baptism authorized in the Scriptures for consecrated believers is merely a symbol, or picture, of the true baptism, which is not into water, but into Christ. Paul explains, “Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death?” Continuing, he says, “For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection.”—Rom. 6:3,5

What was the “likeness” of Jesus’ death? Paul states, “In that he died, he died unto sin once. . . . Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin.” (vss. 10,11) Jesus never had been a sinner. His death “unto sin” was therefore a sacrificial death on behalf of the world of mankind. Our being planted with him by baptism into death is likewise a sacrificial death, and also on behalf of the dead human race. Later, in this same epistle Paul wrote, “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by

the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.”—Rom. 12:1

Jesus’ sacrificial death unto sin provided for the cancellation of the sentence of death resting against the Adamic race. No other sacrifice is needed for this. Christ’s consecrated followers do not share in this aspect of his sacrifice because, as previously noted, it required a perfect man—a corresponding price for Adam—to accomplish this. The world, however, once made free from Adamic condemnation, needs to be enlightened concerning the sacrificial work of Christ. Upon the understanding and acceptance of this provision it also needs to be lifted up out of all the vestiges of degradation, sickness, and death in order to be restored to the perfection lost in Adam. The followers of Jesus who are faithfully planted together—baptized—in the “likeness of his death,” will participate in this work of enlightenment and restoration.

RECONCILING THE WORLD

Paul wrote, “All things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the ministry of reconciliation. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God.”—II Cor. 5:18-20

It is apparent from this passage that the sacrificing followers of the Master participate with him in

the reconciliation of the world. This work originates with God. He is the great Author of the plan of salvation of the lost race, and this plan was put into operation through Jesus—"God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself." Then we, the followers of Christ, are brought into the picture as Christ's representatives in the work of reconciliation for which he made provision. We are given the "ministry of reconciliation."

Verse 21 reads, "For he hath made him to be sin [a sin-offering] for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him." Here we have the explanation of the basis upon which we, who are by inheritance members of the sin-cursed and dying race, can be used by God in the work of reconciliation. It is because Christ made provision for our reconciliation, and upon the acceptance of this provision we are "made the righteousness of God in him." We, as consecrated believers, add nothing to the merit of the blood by which we are reconciled, but the power of that blood effects our reconciliation. God reckons us as perfect, and gives us the privilege of participating with Christ in the work of reconciliation for others.

The following verse, which is the first verse of II Corinthians 6, reads, "We then, as workers together with him, beseech you also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain." How marvelous is "the grace of God" which Paul urges us not to receive in vain. This privilege of being workers together with God is one which embraces two ages in the divine plan of salvation—the Gospel Age and the Messianic Age. Christ commissioned his followers to go into all the world and preach the Gospel—the word of

reconciliation. This work requires sacrifice and the laying down of our lives. It is this that is involved in our death baptism with Christ, our suffering and dying with him. Then, as we have seen, the work of the approaching Messianic Age, when Christ's body members have all been gathered and prepared, will be to reconcile and restore mankind to life.

Verse 2 of chapter 6 reads, "I have heard thee in a time accepted, and in the day of salvation have I succoured thee: behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation." The expression, "Now is the accepted time," does not apply to the lifetime of individuals, but to an age in the plan of God—the Gospel Age—when God accepts the sacrifice of his people and assigns them a role in his plan as workers together with him. In this text, Paul is quoting in part from Isaiah 49:8,9: "Thus saith the LORD, In an acceptable time have I heard thee, and in a day of salvation have I helped thee: and I will preserve thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, to establish the earth, to cause to inherit the desolate heritages; That thou mayest say to the prisoners, Go forth; to them that are in darkness, Shew yourselves. They shall feed in the ways, and their pastures shall be in all high places."

THE BRIDE

In symbolic language the Bible speaks of the church as a whole—all those who, during the Gospel Age, are planted together in the likeness of Jesus death, as the "bride" of Christ. In Revelation 19:7, Jesus is mentioned as the "Lamb," because of the sacrificial nature of his work of redemption.

We read, "Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready."

The adornment of the bride-to-be is unselfish love which leads to sacrifice for others. It is also an adornment of humility and obedience in doing God's will. It is a rich combination of all the fruits and graces of the Holy Spirit. (Gal. 5:22,23; II Pet. 1:5-8) It is only when each prospective member of Christ's future bride is thus adorned, and then brought forth in the first resurrection, that the marriage of the Lamb will take place.

It will be then that Revelation 22:17 will be fulfilled, for not until then will there be a bride. The text reads, "The Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely." Here we are informed that "the Spirit and the bride" will constitute the forefront of those who invite mankind to partake of the water of life. Here again is revealed the special position in the plan of salvation to be occupied by those who are planted together in the likeness of Jesus' death.

With such understanding, it is no marvel that Paul points out how futile would be Christian suffering and death, how empty of meaning our baptism for the dead world of mankind, if there is to be no resurrection of the dead! With rejoicing, however, we claim the scriptural promise that there is to be a resurrection of the dead, because Christ Jesus our Lord has already been raised from the dead and exalted to heavenly glory. The first resurrection will embrace all who have suffered

and died with him, that they might live and reign with him, but this glorious hope can be realized only through faithfulness in death baptism.

We rejoice in the assurance of divine help for those who are laying down their lives in sacrifice. One of the greatest incentives to faithfulness is the truth of the Scriptures, such as given in our opening text, that the Church's death baptism is to accrue to the benefit of the world. Let us be faithful, that we might have a share in the great future work of restoring the dead world to life, enlightening them, and giving them the opportunity to live forever. ■