

What is Baptism for the Dead? By Joshua Stucki, Callao Christian Church

1 Corinthians 15:29 reads, “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?”

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Without getting involved in endless opinions and theories, let’s look at two themes we are certain about in the New Testament: baptism and what happens with the dead. This will inform us on how we should understand “baptism for the dead.”

First, we understand that baptism in the above verse is water baptism. No one genuinely contests this. We also understand that water baptism is the time in which our sins are forgiven and the indwelling gift of the Holy Spirit is provided (Acts 2:38, 22:16, 1 Peter 3:21, Colossians 2:12, Galatians 3:27, etc.).

Second, we are certain what happens with the dead in the New Testament. The authoritative passage on this subject is found in 1 Thessalonians 4:16+17. First, the dead in Christ will rise first, and then those alive in Christ will be caught up with Him. Lastly, the dead will rise, to their judgment of the second death (Revelation 2:11, 20:6, 14, 21:8).

In Peter 3:20-21, we have probably have the clearest example of these two concepts combined:

“²⁰ to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, ²¹ and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body

but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God.^[4] It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ,”

First, God was patient, hoping all to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9, 1 Timothy 2:4). Second, only a few people are saved, like Jesus’ telling of the wide and narrow roads (Matthew 7:13+14). Third, these few people “were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also”. Baptism is the “vehicle” by which God now saves a believer, just like God used the ark as the “vehicle” by which Noah and his family was saved. Fourth, this means baptism saves *from* death now, just like the ark saved *from* death then. Fifth, just like the ark would have been useless without God’s command and instruction, baptism would be worthless without the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It isn’t about the water itself, just like it wasn’t about the ark itself, but rather it is God’s saving benefit through both that give them their value.

Therefore, if baptism is the vehicle by which we are saved from death now, then 1 Corinthians 15:29 would read more accurately, “Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptized because they anticipate rising from the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized to save themselves from death?”

Thus, we are not talking about baptizing *for* the dead at all. We are talking about how our baptism, when by the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, will raise us up on the last day.

Another way to put it is Paul’s question is ultimately rhetorical; he is asking, what will baptized believers do if there is no resurrection of the dead? Well, obviously, their baptism won’t do any good then (but neither would anything else – including the old law). But the resurrection will happen! So our baptisms are valid. Thank God for His wonderful gift!