

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 221

Baptism for the Dead

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Episode Summary

1 Corinthians 15:29 is one of the more enigmatic verses in the Bible. Scholars have long struggled with the meaning of Paul's questions: ". . . What do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?" Just what was going on at Corinth that involved baptism for the dead? Is this literal (water) baptism or something else? Who are the dead – believers or unbelievers? Does baptism help dead unbelievers in the afterlife? If not, what's the benefit? How does this verse fit the wider context of Paul's discourse on the resurrection?

Transcript

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, episode 221: Baptism for the Dead. I'm the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey, Mike, how you doing?

MH: Well, I'm feeling better than the dead in this passage. [laughs]

TS: I hope so.

MH: No, Pretty good. Yeah. Yeah, I'm not sick or anything. I was just trying to be funny and failed miserably. So yeah, what can I say?

TS: That's okay. I fail miserably all the time. I'm surprised if anybody ever laughs at half the stuff I say. My wife gets mad at me, but...

MH: Me, too.

TS: I tell her, you got to throw things up or you'll never know what's going to stick. So that's my motto: lots of bad jokes.

MH: Does she roll... do you get the eye roll then?

TS: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, I get it a lot. But what are you gonna do? All right, let's just...

MH: Yeah, I've seen that, too. Or the head shake.

TS: Yeah, the head shake and the eye roll. So much fun, so much fun, Yeah. Well, Mike what are we talking about today. Baptism for the dead?

MH: I mean, yeah... baptism for the dead. The passage for this is 1 Corinthians 15:22-32. This is probably on everybody's list of really strange passages that just make you scratch your head. And be comforted if that's you because I'm going to give a statistic in a moment here that will tell you very clearly that you're not alone. Scholars have really wrestled very hard—very frequently—with this passage. You're not going to believe the statistic I give you, but I'm actually going to get you access to the materials that will show you that no, it's not an exaggeration as to how many views there are of this passage.

But let's just jump in. I'm going to read the passage (1Corinthians 15:22-32) and we'll go from there. This is Paul writing about the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, so the resurrection is a component of how we want to answer, “What in the world is he talking about here, and what's being alluded to?” I'll actually back up to verse 20, just to not make the entry in here sound too awkward.

²⁰ But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. ²² For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. ²³ But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. ²⁴ Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. ²⁵ For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶ The last enemy to be destroyed is death. ²⁷ For “God has put all things in subjection under his feet.” But when it says, “all things are put in subjection,” it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him. ²⁸ When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all.

Now here's the verse:

²⁹ Otherwise, what do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf? ³⁰ Why

are we in danger every hour? ³¹ I protest, brothers, by my pride in you, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die every day! ³² What do I gain if, humanly speaking, I fought with beasts at Ephesus? If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."

So that's 1 Corinthians 15:20-32. Let me the read the key verse again that we're going to be focusing on:

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²⁹ Otherwise [in view of all this resurrection talk], what do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?

I'm going to put a resource in the protected folder for newsletter subscribers. This is a journal article, and I'm going to be referencing this journal article because I think it's probably the best thing I've ever read on this passage. So here it is. It's an article by James E. Patrick called "Living Rewards for Dead Apostles: Baptized for the Dead in 1 Corinthians 15:29." That's from the *Journal of New Testament Studies*, Volume 52 (which was published in 2006), pages 71 through 85. I'm going to be interacting with this article. I'm going to summarize the issues. This is a lengthy article, but it is nothing in comparison to what has gone before it.

Now Patrick himself notes in this article that there are over 40 views as to what this verse means, and he cites articles that add to that number. The 40 are the ones that he has counted himself. Those 40 are documented in a series of five articles that push the number beyond 40, but the 40 that Patrick is thinking of are documented in a series of five articles by Bernard Foschini in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, beginning in 1950 and extending into 1951. So Foschini wrote a series of five articles that totaled well over a hundred pages just on this verse and how it has been understood historically—its interpretive history. So the challenge for us isn't that there's nothing to say. The challenge is winnowing the wheat from the chaff, as far as plausibility.

Patrick in his article, I think, does a really good job of that, but he alerts you up front: "Look there's over 40 that I've counted, but if you read Foschini's series of five articles, it's probably going to be even more." There's no shortage of guesses or speculation as to what in the world is going on here.

To be fair, in part the diversity of views arises from several hermeneutical questions and the interpretive options that result from those questions. Some of these questions... I'm sure if you're listening to this you're going to think, "Well, I don't even really need to ask that one because we can sort of cross that one off." I'll grant that, and I would agree. But just to give you an idea, here are the interpretive questions that in the history of scholarship, scholars of all theological

persuasions have asked and that produces this proliferation of views. So here's the sample:

- Is the baptism spoken of literal baptism? In other words is this water baptism or is this metaphorical? You've got to think about both. You've got to ask that.
- Who are "the dead?" In the baptism for the dead, are the dead martyrs from the church at Corinth? Are they martyrs from elsewhere outside the church? Are the dead literally dead people, or is this some kind of metaphorical death that's being referred to?
- If this is actual water baptism and if it's really dead people in view that living people are being baptized on behalf of, why are they doing this? That's probably the most obvious question. But here is just a short list of sub-questions that have that have accrued to that:
 - So why are they doing this?
 - Is this penance for the Purgatorial relief of the dead? In other words, are people being baptized for the benefit of the dead, like to get the dead out of Purgatory or so that the dead can still be saved, or is it purely memorial and doesn't really do anything for the dead? "It's just a memorial." What about that option?
 - Does the phrase merely refer to the ritual washing of dead bodies? People have proposed that, therefore, it has nothing to do with a sacramental view of baptism or even believers' baptism.
- If we have water baptism that isn't for the benefit of the dead, then the benefit must be for the person being baptized, right? That would seem reasonable. So what is that? Is it some kind of symbolic identification with the persecuted dead person to hasten the second coming, maybe, or for some other purpose? Do they just want to identify with some martyr—some dead person that has gone on before? Does it refer to ritual washing after coming into contact with a dead body, just some sort of Jewish crossover or hangover from ritual purity?

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Again, that's just a smattering—a really short list—of things that scholars have had to think about in long treatments and, again, in Foschini's series of five articles that extends well over 100 pages. I've put those in the protected folder, as well. The only way you're going to get access to this material is if you're a newsletter subscriber. I can't post these online just willy-nilly because it's peer-reviewed stuff.

Now moving forward for our episode, I'm going to give a brief overview of issues that give us an idea of what I think are the most necessary components that need to be really be thought about when it comes to this, because obviously we're not

going to go through all 40 views in an episode of the podcast. So let's just start with defining some terms.

The first term to define is “baptism.” What are we talking about here? Now Patrick, in his article, notes that Foschini divided the options on this term to three alternative explanations: metaphorical baptism, literal baptism that had nothing to do with some sacramental effect, and then sacramental baptism. Sacramental baptism (for those who might not be familiar with that kind of terminology) is that it has something to do with the dispensing of grace, whether it's saving grace or something else. There are those who connect those ideas with baptism and those who don't, but it's water baptism in either respect. So you've got two “brands” of water baptism and then the metaphorical, so that's what Foschini did. He winnowed the options down to those three and then he discussed them.

Now Foschini is writing in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*. Where do you think he's going to land? Foschini landed on the sacramental view, reasoning that in every other passage where Paul speaks of baptism it is in reference to sacramental baptism. I don't agree with that—the “every other passage” idea. I would say 1 Corinthians 12:13, for instance, is not water baptism. It says:

¹³ For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

That's what most theologians call “Spirit baptism”—a reference to being put into the body of Christ, and you're not in the body of Christ unless you have expressed belief in the gospel. If you're baptizing an infant or whatever, they're not making a profession of faith. If you want to know my take on baptism, listen to the early episodes of this podcast (probably the first three episodes or something like that). There are other passages that I think pretty clearly refer to spirit baptism—being placed in the body of Christ and whatnot. There are other passages that we could talk about, as well, where in the Greek the same terminology is not referring to what we would think of as baptism associated with the Body of Christ in any respect. So what Foschini says seems a little dubious to me. Nevertheless, I would fall on the side that 1 Corinthians 15:29 is referencing a water baptism practice, so I'm buying that part of it. That seems to me the most natural reading, and Patrick follows the same trajectory. He writes:

In my proposed explanation, the baptism being carried out is the standard Christian sacramental baptism of new believers, consistent with Paul's use of the word elsewhere.

So Patrick is connecting it to believers' baptism. He uses the sacramental terminology, but he's not talking about what Foschini was talking about. And I tend to not use sacramental terminology because I think it's confusing, and honestly, I think it adds to what baptism is. Again, if you want to know what my

take is, I can give it to you in one sentence. You can you can listen to the early episodes of the podcast to find out.

But in view of Colossians 2:10-12, where we've got a connection between circumcision and baptism, my view is that we shouldn't be saying anything about baptism that we can't say about circumcision. Circumcision didn't guarantee or decide anybody's salvation. It didn't put them on the road to salvation, like it was some sort of spiritual awakening. It has a different a different purpose that I think coincides really well with baptism in the New Testament. So I buy the connection between the two because, hey, Paul says there's some kind of connection here. But I don't think it has anything to do with salvation or kick-starting someone on the road to salvation or anything like that. Again, if you want to know what that is (what I think), listen to the early episodes.

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So I don't have a problem here affirming that this is water baptism because it fits well within my view, which derives out of this link with circumcision. So Patrick and I agree that we're talking about water baptism here. And that's probably the majority view. As many views as there are of this, if you read through Foschini's stuff, I think it's really fair to say that most people are going to say they were actually baptizing people here with water.

Next term: "the dead." Who are the dead? Now this seems to clearly point to people who are actually dead. They've literally died. That just seems to me to be the most natural reading of the passage. Patrick, again, looks at this the same way. He says:

While Paul does use the word 'dead' metaphorically elsewhere...

For instance, Rom 8.10:

¹⁰ But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.

Obviously, he's talking to people who are actually living and breathing. So Paul does use reference "death" and "dead" metaphorically elsewhere, but despite that he's using the literal meaning, not only here in 1st Corinthians 15, but even in the second half of verse 29. It's linked directly to the first half because of the language: "If the dead are not raised at all, why are they baptized for them?" So it's pretty obvious that the dead there are in connection with the talk of resurrection, which in First Corinthians 15 is quite bodily. He's talking about dead people. That doesn't seem too difficult. Now again, that immediate context undermines the metaphorical interpretations that other scholars have offered. Some of those go all the way back into Early Church Fathers. They tried to argue for a metaphorical view. Again, I'm not buying it. Lots of people don't buy it. So I'd agree that Paul is talking about people who are actually dead.

Third, what about the identity of the dead? Well, who are they? This is an issue that requires a little bit of thought and that we'll come back to a little bit later on, as well. This is an issue that might not be as obvious as the first two, but it's still important. If we establish that the dead are really dead people (and again, that's where I'm at), who are they, and does the question matter? I think it does, and so does Patrick. Again, we're referencing his article here, which I highly recommend. So he wants to know who they are, and we're going to hit that at some point.

But this this question (who are the dead?) gives rise to a couple of sub-questions. Were the dead (whoever they were) previously baptized? See, that's a sub-question because you might be thinking, "Wow, maybe living people are being baptized in view of this dead person that wasn't baptized before they died and maybe the Corinthians are thinking that baptism helps them in some way in the afterlife. So maybe that's why they're doing it." So that's a sub-question. Related to that, were these dead (whoever they were) believers or unbelievers when they died? And you can see where this is going—where this would sort of drift into a sacramental idea of baptism. If you held that view of baptism and you knew somebody, whether they had professed faith in Christ or not, and they die and you're thinking, "Oh, well, I better go get baptized for them to help them out on the other side." You could see what the concatenation of ideas would be.

So all of these are things that need thought; they need attention. Now Patrick directs our attention on these questions (both the question of who they are and then these sub-questions) to the work of Jeremias, a very famous New Testament scholar. He is a Second Temple Jewish scholar who noticed that in this chapter there is a consistent distinction between *nekroi*, which is the Greek plural term for dead... There's a distinction between *necroi* and *ho nekroi*. That would be the same word with a definite article in front of it. So Jeremias said that it's kind of interesting that in this chapter, the word *nekroi* ("dead" with or without the definite article—the word "the")...that seems to matter. Patrick quotes Jeremias' conclusion that *nekroi* without an article denoted dead people in general, whereas with the article *ho nekroi* denoted deceased Christians. So Patrick writes in response to that (I'm not going to give you the whole Jeremias quote:

Thus the context again undermines interpretations such as that of Richterus, who included the preceding phrase 'what will they do' to arrive at the meaning, 'What will those being baptised gain beyond the (unbaptised) unbeliever?', and likewise the practice of the Mormons, who are baptised vicariously for dead ancestors not of the Mormon religion.

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Now what Patrick is saying is there is that those kind of views really don't work. Well, they don't really work because there's a distinction of "dead" and "the dead." And "the dead" are deceased Christians. Again, he's depending on the

scholarship of Jeremias there who noticed this pattern. So this seems like a good text-driven position—that the dead are, in fact, deceased Christians so they don't need somebody living to be baptized for them to get them into heaven or do anything else. If this pattern is meaningful, then that sort of wipes off the table the notion that a living person can be baptized to spiritually benefit a dead person, because according to this verse and this pattern, the dead people that the living are being baptized for are already believers. So that just sort of wipes that out.

So if you follow Jeremias' data and the conclusion that “the dead” are deceased Christian believers, the next question is, “Well, if the dead are already believers, then why are people at Corinth being baptized for those dead believers? Was it because those believers died before they were actually baptized themselves?” In this context it's like, okay somebody believes in Christ and they died before they could be baptized. Was there some compelling need to do that? Is that what's going on here? Even though they believed... It doesn't really answer the question, does it? Because then you have to ask yourself, “Well, what does it matter?”

So back to the question. If we're looking at dead Christian believers, then why were the people at Corinth being baptized for those dead believers? Was it because those believers died before being baptized? If so, what would the point be if they were already believers? What would baptism do for them if they had been baptized before death, or in light of the death, something like that. What's the point? I mean, why? It just seems like this is nonsensical to do this. Now, the normal practice of the Early Church (I'm sure this isn't going to surprise anybody) was to baptize someone immediately after conversion. That was the norm. That would mean that dying before baptism, if you had professed your faith in Christ, would be pretty unusual. That's not impossible, obviously, but it would be uncommon, and you could go that direction that maybe 1 Corinthians 15:29 is sort of aimed at the exception here. So you can go that way, presuming that the practice in that that verse was rarely performed. The question that remains, then, is how the practice connects to Paul's rhetoric. So even if you want to be in the camp that says, “I think the Corinthian believers were being baptized for people who accepted Christ, but they died before baptism, so the Christians in Corinth are being baptized for those people, even though they were already believers and it was pretty rare, but that's what they were doing...” Not only doesn't that really answer “why” (because what does it do for them?), but if you go that direction, then you still have to not only ask the why question, but it might be helpful... You might get clarity if we could sort of identify those people—the ones who were dead—more specifically. And Patrick mentions this because... I'm not going to get ahead here and sort of give you his view, which again I think is probably the best way to understand it. And he didn't come up with this. It's not a new view to add to the 40, it's some nuancing of stuff that's already been said here. But being able to identify the dead a little bit more actually sort of helps connect this verse to Paul's overall discussion, not only of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, but some other things in 1 Corinthians 15. We'll get there in a

moment.

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Now we've defined a few terms, and some of that we'll come back to. So the next issue we need to tackle is what is the meaning of the Greek preposition *hyper* in verse 29? There are mainly two translation choices that you'll see in English translations. What do people mean by being baptized for (*hyper*) the dead or what do people mean by being baptized on behalf of (*hyper*) the dead? The second option there is the one that's in the ESV. Now think about those two options for a moment. The Greek preposition *hyper* is being translated as "for" (baptized *for* the dead), and then the other option is baptized *on behalf* of the dead. Now the first option sort of creates the impression that the dead benefit from the baptism: baptized *for* the dead, like the dead are getting something out of it. And this is where you get the idea of getting the dead out of Purgatory or some sort of sacramental benefit. If that's what's in your head, then you might prefer to translate *hyper* as "for," because in English it conveys that there's some benefit going on. The second option can do that, too: *on behalf* of the dead. In other words, the dead get something out of it. But it includes the nuance of sort of taking responsibility for, or doing something in the place of, or because of the dead. So the second one adds a few interpretive options. Both of those translation choices are possible, but the intended semantic still needs articulation.

Let me just stop here. You realize, I hope, that a translation of a Bible verse or a Biblical word does not tell you what that means in context. Meaning is semantics. Semantics and translation are two related but different things. What a translation really is... If you took a Greek or Hebrew class in seminary, you're going to hear the word "gloss"—"English gloss." An English gloss is an English equivalent—sort of a utilitarian equivalent to something you could find in a quick dictionary lookup for a Greek or Hebrew word. But that doesn't answer the question of whether there are other possible glosses. And how do we know which of the possible glosses—which of the possible English equivalents—is best here? We have to be thinking about how our particular word is used in the immediate and the wider context, and, of course, there are other contexts: literary context, worldview context, all this kind of stuff. That's where semantics operates. Semantics is trying to determine meaning, not just provide an English equivalent. Those are two different but related things.

So back to our discussion here. They're both possible. But really, the semantics of the whole thing still needs articulation. We still haven't figured that out. We still haven't decided anything. A grammatical case is something that helps you pair a noun with an adjective, or even prepositions in this case. It's a grammatical thing. So in Greek, the case of a noun is going to influence the semantics of prepositions. It's just the way the grammar works. So if you surveyed *hyper* followed by a genitive noun (that's what we have here in 1st Corinthians 15:29), you can go a couple different directions with the semantics—with what things mean.

Let's just give you some other examples of *hyper* with a genitive noun and you'll see what I'm talking about here. In Philemon 13, Paul writes to Philemon that Onesimus “served me” (*hyper*) on behalf of you. In other words, instead of looking at something that's sort of like getting a benefit (that Philemon's getting some benefit), the idea was taking responsibility. Onesimus was taking responsibility for or doing something in the place of Philemon. So we can look at this example and say that *hyper*... Rather than just picking an English gloss like “for” or a phrase like “on behalf of,” what does it actually mean? Well if in Philemon 13, *hyper* means “to take responsibility for” or “do something in the place of,” that gives you a little bit more grist for the mill—a little bit more in the way you would talk about what's going on with the preposition.

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In Acts 9:16, Jesus says that he will show Paul that Paul must suffer (*hyper*) for his name—on behalf of or for the sake of his name. The sense is that the name (which is the noun in the genitive) receives some benefit. In other words, the name is glorified or exalted. But the verse could also be read that Paul would have to suffer because of the name of Jesus. Now, those are two different things. Think about it. Why is Paul suffering? Is he suffering so that the name would be exalted—suffering for the sake of the name—or is he suffering because of the name, like the name is what gets him in trouble. And it could be a little bit of both. But when you're talking about semantics, as opposed to just choosing English glosses, this is the exercise of exegesis (one of them, anyway). I mean, you have to look at examples where you have the preposition *hyper*, in this case followed by a genitive, and what are the semantic nuances that this combination (preposition + genitive noun) could evince or could lead you to?

Here's the third one: the combination might lead you to think of a goal. And you'd likely use “for the sake of” in English, meaning “with the goal of” in a verse like 2 Corinthians 1:6. Paul's sufferings have the goal of the comfort and salvation of the Corinthians. He writes:

⁶ If we are afflicted, it is [*hyper*] for your comfort and salvation;

In other words, if we're afflicted, it's with the goal of your comfort and salvation in mind. Now those three examples gave us four semantic nuances. Four of them. So we're going beyond, “Hey, which English word do I like which is a good substitute for this Greek one?” That's translation in its most basic sense—its most basic form. But exegesis is not translation. Part of exegesis is thinking about semantics, and in this case semantics is this particular preposition followed by a noun and a particular grammatical case.

Essentially in just in a few minutes there, we went through three examples and got four nuances. This is how exegesis is done and what should be done. You've got to think. I've said in my own little *60 Second Scholar* books that one of the

best things I can tell people is, “Look, good Bible study is not following a rote method. It's not jumping through hoops. It's not following a list of ten steps and then spitting out something. There's no substitute for thinking about the text.” And hopefully you get into resources, or you take classes, or you listen to a podcast like this one, or something that just helps you think. There's no substitute for thinking in Bible study.

So I'll get off my little soapbox there. What I'm trying to say with this whole little section of the podcast is that translation choices don't resolve the issues. Translations are just words. Behind translation choices are the semantics of those translation choices, and that's really what matters. So the semantics options of this preposition, which is really important, “baptized *hyper* the dead...” What might that mean? The semantic options can be summarized this way:

1. It could mean “for the benefit of,” but what is that benefit? That's a question that still needs to be answered coherently, which is difficult if one cares about faith in the gospel message being the lone requirement for salvation. And I do. So I think this one can sort of be ruled out if what we're talking about is that the act of baptism somehow gets somebody over the hump in the afterlife. We're not talking about that benefit. So we want to be careful about using “benefit” terminology here, even though it's on the table. It's one of the semantic options, but we can't just sort of go with that and say, “Oh, problem solved.” No, then you've got to answer the question, “Well, what's the benefit?” And there you've got to be careful
2. It could mean something like “vicariously in the place of” or “in the place of.” Same problem as that last one: why do they need a substitute? If the death of Christ was what takes care of their sin or gives them eternal life (however we want to verbalize it), then what does that mean—“in place of?” This is where I fall back on the wider context of the connection to circumcision. So I would say we need to be really careful with these two semantic options, because if you go with them, then you have to still answer questions: what's the benefit, and why do we need a substitute here when we have Jesus?

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There are two other semantic options. Again, we have four and I'm just summarizing them here.

3. “For the sake of.” In other words, with a goal in mind. It gets you away from the problems we just talked about, but what the goal is still needs answering, too.
4. And lastly, “on account of.” Does this mean “because of” or “in honor of?” I like the phrase “in honor of” because it gets away from “the benefit of.” It gets away from that benefit language. So this is another way in English that we can express this idea of “on account of,” or having a relationship to

the dead. You could say in English (I'm just making up a sentence here), "I donated to that organization on account of you." In other words, I like you so much or I respect you so much that it prompted me to donate to this organization that you're connected with. So it's kind of an honorific thing. Now, it doesn't benefit you directly. The organization is who is benefited, but I just want you to know that this act in my mind honors you. We're going to come back to that because I actually think that's the trajectory we need to track on when it comes to 1 Corinthians 15:29.

So again, the semantic option is really an important thing. Those last two ("for the sake of" and "on account of" or "because of" or "in honor of") have the dead in view, not the one being baptized. And that's important because we're dealing with real dead people. And if we're going to have living people baptized for dead people, it either benefits the dead in some way... So there's the benefit language, and that becomes tricky. (Maybe we don't want to use the word "benefit.") It may honor the dead in a certain way. There's some connection to the dead or there's some connection to the person being baptized. This is the only place in the New Testament you have this alluded to so there's nothing you can build on about something the person who's getting baptized... that they get some benefit out of this. Because this is the only verse you have and it can't be about the resurrection because the resurrection is based on being in Christ, which is faith in Christ and all that kind of stuff, so it doesn't work there.

I'm hoping that you're seeing why I'm angling toward this honorific idea, because that's actually where I land on this passage, and Patrick lands there, too. I read his article years ago and I think it helped sort this out for me, which is why I'm recommending it. I think it's an excellent article to go through all the different issues.

Ultimately, what we have here is this: Patrick lands in a place that I think is the most coherent option. I'm just going to read you a bit of what he says here. He says:

"The verse can be translated either baptism "on behalf of" the dead [that's what he prefers] or baptism "for" the dead, meaning...

There's the meaning. We're not just worried about English words here, we're worried about meaning.

...meaning that people were being baptized in honor of the dead. And you could also say "because of" the dead—because of something that the dead did that that makes you want to honor them.

So you could go either way with English, but I'm just going to stick with "in honor of" here. People were being baptized in honor of the dead, that is, people were

being baptized in honor of dead apostles. This is where Patrick goes with this. This is where he tries to be more specific as to who the dead are. Remember way back in the beginning of this episode I read his article title, and he actually has the word “apostles” in it. He believes that what's going on in 1 Corinthians 15:29, and I do think this covers all the bases in the chapter—in the context... In other words, the immediate context is that people were being baptized in honor of dead apostles, specifically the “more than 500 witnesses” mentioned in the same chapter. This becomes part of Paul's defense of the resurrection. People were getting baptized to honor these witnesses to the resurrected Jesus. It would make no sense to do that if there was no resurrection. Patrick says in his conclusion:

40:00

New believers were receiving baptism after conversion through the testimony of these dead apostles, and in doing so were baptized into their name, an expression of allegiance in order to bring them greater honor. Thus, they effectively became living rewards for dead apostles.

Put another way, the idea is that people go running around in Corinth and at some point in their life they heard some of these 500 witnesses testify that they saw the resurrected Christ. And it's because of that testimony that people believe. And some of those 500 Witnesses were martyred or they just died by natural causes. And so what we're trying to say here is that there were people in Corinth who said, “That guy that died was one of the witnesses of the resurrected Jesus, and I heard the gospel through him. I heard his story and I came to know the Lord and I want to be baptized to honor him. So when I get baptized, in my little baptismal formula we're going to recognize him. I'm going to be baptized in honor of this dead guy so that I can become essentially a living reward for this guy in heaven. I become a living fruit—a living reward—of his ministry.”

So I think that is probably the most coherent way to look at the passage. It keeps it in the context of 1st Corinthians 15. It keeps the resurrection in view. In other words, it makes Paul's rhetoric coherent, because if you don't believe in the resurrection, why would you do this? It's because you *do* believe in the resurrection, you *do* believe that that that guy who was dead is still alive in the resurrection, and you're becoming a living testimony to his legacy to honor him because it was through his testimony you came to the Lord. So if you don't believe any of that's going on, why would you do this? It doesn't make any sense. So it keeps the discussion orbited around the issue of the resurrection. It's semantically certainly in line with other possibilities (the way the preposition is used elsewhere). It gets the dead as really dead people—deceased Christians. Again, I think Jeremias' pattern recognition here is important. It's an actual baptism going on. All of the pieces can come together in this and not get us sidetracked into some alternative gospel about, “Well, I need to get baptized for that dead person that I'm going to invoke in my baptism so that they have eternal

life.” That’s not the gospel. It’s an alternative gospel. So I think it’s internally consistent and I think it’s externally consistent, just in the in the wider picture.

Now, there are two sidebars issues here that I debated a little while whether I wanted to tack these on in the episode. But I’m going to do it because I think people might be interested in them and they do attach to what’s going on here.

One sidebar issue is that if you get into this subject, you’re going to see some commentators suggest that Paul didn’t believe in the practice of baptism for the dead but he used it as a reference point only in defense of resurrection. Like Paul’s just referring to something that Corinthians did and just thought it was utter nonsense and said, “Yeah, well, I’ll use it in an argument. They’ll know what I’m talking about, even though I think it’s just craziness.” Now Patrick comments that Ambrosiaster, who lived in the 4th Century AD, believed that verse 29 referred to vicarious baptism for the dead, but that Paul didn’t approve of that. And in support he appealed to the contrast between “they” of verse 29 and “we” of verses 30- 32. Foshchini instead deduced the “also” of verse 30 as evidence of Paul’s agreement with baptism in verses 29 and 33. But even the lack of any explicit condemnation of the practice by Paul is significant. So Patrick objects to this. He’s like, “Look, if Paul was opposed to this he would have said something directly explicitly in opposition, but he doesn’t do that. He doesn’t do it. And he certainly would have done it here because it’s so fundamental to what he’s trying to teach about the resurrection and what he has taught elsewhere about the gospel. But he would have said something here if he really objected to the practice.” So back to Patrick. He says:

If Paul were to cite a practice he did not agree with to support his argument for the resurrection his opponents in Corinth and elsewhere could justly accuse him of theological inconsistency.

45:00

And I agree. I think Patrick’s right. I think this whole notion that Paul used this but assigned no value to it or no validity to it... I don’t think that’s the right trajectory. So I would reject that. That’s one sidebar.

Now the other sidebar is a little bit longer and I think it will be interesting to people in this audience. It has to do with the word “apostle” here. Now you’ll notice in the title of Patrick’s article and his conclusion that I read that it refers to the dead as being dead apostles, right? And he gets that from earlier in 1 Corinthians 15. So I think this is as good a place as any to comment on the term “apostle” because it does show up in 1 Corinthians 15 earlier in the chapter in a pretty interesting way. So this is a bit of a sidebar on the term “apostle.” Let me just go read the reference here. This is where you get into the “500” language. So in 1 Corinthians 15:3, Paul says:

³For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. ⁹For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

Let's think about the word "apostle" a little bit. They were actually a variety of apostles in the New Testament. I'm going to put them in tiers. First tier is the original Twelve. The term just means "sent one." We know that; that's the simple stuff. But you have a first-tier group—the original Twelve. It's generally agreed that the Twelve are a special group because of the New Testament phrase "the Twelve." It shows up in a number of places. And when the number fell to 11 because of what happened with Judas, the original Apostles felt compelled to restore the number to twelve. This is Acts chapter 1:15-26. This is likely due to the parallelism with the twelve tribes. Go to Revelation 21:12 and 14, you get the twelve going there. But Paul is beyond the Twelve. He is an interesting addition. Thirteen would bring the total to... Paul clearly is not one of the Twelve but he still called an apostle. So we have to ask, "What are the criteria for inclusion in the Twelve?" Well Acts 1 (when they go to replace Judas in Acts 1:21-22) tells us that the candidates for replacement (the ones that they were going to cast lots for)... Here were the criteria: you had to have accompanied the other Eleven since the time of Jesus' baptism and you had to have been a witness to the resurrected Christ before his ascension. Obviously Paul doesn't qualify there and Paul knew it, as we're going to see in a moment, but that's essentially what they were thinking in Acts 1 when they go to replace Judas.

Now the function of the Twelve... We don't need to go too far on the rabbit trail here, but they had authority over other churches. They were the ones that The Comforter would come to, all that sort of stuff. They validated the teaching of others, even Paul. He had to spend time with the Twelve in Jerusalem to have them check him out and all that kind of stuff. So they're the first tier.

There's also a second tier, which includes Paul and "the other apostles," like in the phrase in the passage we just read, who are not among the Twelve but who had seen the risen Christ and apparently been commissioned by him. Look at look at the words in 1 Corinthians 15. He says:

³For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he

was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

He gets the rest of the original ones Jesus appears to. You've got Peter first and then the rest of them, so they've got the Twelve covered.

⁶Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.⁷Then he appeared to James...

Okay, James was going to be the head of the Church of Jerusalem, but he wasn't one of the Twelve. This is James, the Lord's brother—Jesus' brother—who wasn't a believer until at some point. But he appeared to James then to all the apostles.

⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.⁹ For I am the least of the apostles...

50:00

Now it would seem from this description that Paul was the last person to whom Jesus made an appearance for commissioning in the New Testament era. And I do take the passage that way. A lot of people do. I think Paul actually means something by "last of all." "I'm it." Why would he be it? Because he's selected to go to the Gentiles. We've got the Jews covered, got the Twelve, we've got that going on. We've got James in the Jerusalem Church. Because some of these people are going to be called Apostles, as well. They're not the Twelve, but they're still apostles. But we've got the Jews covered, and now we've got the Gentiles—Jew first, then the Gentile. Paul is the one appointed to preach to the Gentiles. And so this is the rationale for Paul saying, "I'm the last one. I get the mop-up job. I go to the Gentiles." Paul was selected to go to the Gentiles, something that had an eschatological role: the fullness of the Gentiles, revealing the mystery that Gentiles were heirs of the promises and the seed of Abraham (Ephesians 3:3-6, Galatians 3). Go read that, we've mentioned it before on the podcast.

Now, what's interesting here, as far as the Old Testament goes... You should always ask, "Does the Old Testament play a role in any of this?? Here's the question: are Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 15:10 an allusion to Isaiah 49:4? Both passages have Gentile inclusion in view. Here's Isaiah 49:4. Listen to this. Let me read Corinthians 15:10 first. Paul says in verse 9:

⁹For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and

his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.

Now Read Isaiah 49:4:

**⁴But I said, “I have labored in vain;
I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;
yet surely my right is with the LORD,
and my recompense with my God.”**

Now the question is, was that floating around in Paul's head when he writes:

¹⁰But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.

“I'm the least of the Apostles. I'm the last one.” If so, it seems Paul was further alluding to Isaiah 49:6 and that he saw a sequence unfolding in Old Testament prophecy about the incarnate servant in the messiah—the restoration of the Twelve tribes—Israel and Judah (all twelve)—and the salvation of the Gentiles. And he saw his own place in that sequence. Now, I'm going to read Isaiah 49, not just verse 4 but verses 1-6. Just listen to this:

**Listen to me, O coastlands,
and give attention, you peoples from afar.
The LORD called me from the womb,
from the body of my mother he named my name.
²He made my mouth like a sharp sword;
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me a polished arrow;
in his quiver he hid me away.
³And he said to me, “You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will be glorified.”**

Now, if you know a little bit about servant theology in Isaiah, “servant” most often is the nation Israel, but it's also an individual who represents Israel. So those first three verses could very well be talking about Jesus.

**The LORD called me from the womb,
from the body of my mother he named my name.**

² He made my mouth like a sharp sword;
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me a polished arrow;
in his quiver he hid me away.
³ And he said to me, "You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will be glorified."
⁴ But I said, "I have labored in vain;
I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;
yet surely my right is with the LORD,
and my recompense with my God."

There would be scholars who sort of connect that to the suffering on the cross and whatnot.

⁵ And now the LORD says,
he who formed me from the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him;
and that Israel might be gathered to him—
for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD,
and my God has become my strength—
⁶ he says:
"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to bring back the preserved of Israel;
I will make you as a light for the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

55:00

There you have the Gentiles included. Here's the argument: Paul is looking at this passage and knowing it well, thinking about the life and the ministry of Jesus, the suffering of Jesus, and what it was all about. Of course it's about the regathering of the tribes. We've had Pentecost. Of course it's about that, but it's also about the Gentiles. It's about the Gentiles, and Paul is mentally placing himself in this passage as the apostle to the Gentiles. And thinking about verse 4: "I have spent my strength" and all this talk about laboring in vain, and then in 1 Corinthians 15:10:

⁹ For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and

his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.

Could this be what Paul's thinking about? Again, scholars go back and forth on this. But it's really interesting because if you look at Paul's terminology, "last of all, as one untimely born, he appeared also to me," and we know Paul thought a lot about the fullness of the Gentiles. We know Paul wanted to get to Spain to finish the job—to reclaim the disinherited nations. If this is really what's floating around in Paul's head... He is the last of the second-tier apostles. He's the last one commissioned.

Now, there are other second-tier references. James gets singled out. Look at Galatians 1:19. Paul says:

¹⁹ But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother.

So James gets called an apostle, even though he's not one of the Twelve. He had great authority, of course, in Jerusalem. In 1 Corinthians 9 Paul talks about other apostles. So there's this second tier right underneath the Twelve. Paul is part of that, but he's the last one, again, apparently in his thinking because he's connected with the salvation of the Gentiles and the end of the mission in Isaiah 49—the mission of the servant. The end of that mission is ultimately to bring the nations back along with the tribes of Israel.

There's a third group. There are other apostles mentioned by name in the New Testament who were not of the 12, and there's no evidence that they saw the resurrected Christ in the flesh. Third tier... I'll give you some examples. Other Apostles are mentioned by name—Barnabas, Acts 13:2-3:

² While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." ³ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

They are sent ones. It's the verbal form of apostle (*apostolo*). They're sent. In Acts 14:4, the people of the city were divided, some with the Jews and some with the apostles. Well, who are the apostles in the scene in Acts 14? It's Paul and Barnabas. You have Andronicus and Junia in Romans 16:7 being "prominent among the apostles." You have Silas in Acts 15:40.

⁴⁰ but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord.

You read further on in 1 Thessalonians 2:6:

⁶ Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ.

Again, if you look at the circumstances historically, Silas is the one with Paul on his journey to the Thessalonians. He would have been included in that comment about “apostles” (plural). And there's no proof that these people, like the 500 or at Paul's level... Ephesians 4:11 refers to apostles. This is written after the ascension. So the apostles that are mentioned there (“he gave them apostles, prophets, evangelists, so on and so forth”) are not the level of the Twelve or even at the level of the second-tier. They were probably commissioned by somebody else. Again, not Jesus himself. It can't be assumed that this office, therefore, necessarily means authority over other churches, since apostles in this group (the third tier) didn't have regional authority and there are churches in the New Testament (like in Revelation 1:3) that are never said to have been started by an apostle.

1:00:00

Again, I mention this because it is connected to our discussion. And what Patrick says (and where I'm landing, as well, with him) is that what's happening in Corinth is that people are being baptized to honor dead “sent ones”—people who saw the resurrected Christ that Paul alludes to that in the same chapter—in 1st Corinthians 15. And it was through their testimony that these people have come to the faith. Some of them have died. Paul says some of them are still alive, but some of them have died, and so to honor them and honor their faithfulness, honor their work, you had Corinthians being baptized—connecting their name to their baptism—to honor them. Not to help them get to heaven, not to help them have everlasting life, not so that they get time off in Purgatory. They're honoring them because of their testimony, because it's linked to their own salvation. That's why they're submitting to baptism in the first place.

So to wrap it up, if new believers at Corinth were being baptized in honor of dead sent ones—dead people who went out and spread the gospel—and there were people at Corinth who heard their testimony and were saved... If they're being baptized in honor of dead apostles who had been among the 500 who saw the Lord, then it would make a lot of sense to see the 500 as well-known witnesses for Jesus. And again, in the context of 1st Corinthians 15, it would make no sense to do this at all if you didn't believe in the resurrection. And that's why Paul is using the example. He knows it's happening. He doesn't poo-poo it. He doesn't rail against it. He doesn't correct it. He doesn't say anything about it. But he uses it to say, “Look, why would you do this if there is no resurrection from the dead?” It's an effective argument. So again, I think there's a there's a clear, coherent way to navigate the passage—to understand what's going on at Corinth and to interpret the verse.

TS: All right, Mike. We appreciate it. That's very interesting. That's perfect. All right, Mike. Well, next week we're going to have a special guest. We're gonna have Rusty Osborne on, who's actually going to be at the Naked Bible Conference. Any idea what you and Rusty are going to talk about next week?

MH: Oh, we're gonna we're going to talk about a couple things in his book. He's going to be landing at a specific place. His book is on the tree imagery and kingship in the ancient Near East, so we're gonna cherry-pick a few items from that book, but then it's sort of to give people a little taste—a little warm-up—of something that he's going to get into specifically at the conference. Or what he's going to do at the conference is related to the stuff that we'll talk about in broad terms next week.

TS: All right. I'm looking forward to that. And again, we just want to thank everybody for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God bless.