

1 Corinthians 15:29 (Edward Denny) 130021

Miscellaneous Papers, Baptism over the Dead.

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THE ordinary interpretation of 1 Cor. 15:29, is this, that they who, in the earlier ages of the Church, when persecution was raging around them, came forward professing the faith of Christ, and desiring to be baptized, were animated by a similar spirit to that which inspires the soldier who on the battle-field presses forward to the assault in the room of those who had fallen. They were, supposing this to be the meaning of the passage, baptized in the room of their martyred brethren, who, loving not their lives unto the death, 'had suffered for Christ. Now this interpretation, which I do not believe to be the true one, I strongly suspect in reality satisfies no one; not even those who, echoing the thoughts of those who have written about it, have spoken as though it were a point incontrovertibly settled. How should it do so, seeing that it limits the word in this case to only a few? without allowing it to apply, as we think it must do, to all, the whole Church of God, and not merely to the rare cases above named.

And now, before I proceed, let me observe that the Passage in one respect is defectively rendered—"over the dead," not "for the dead," we should—read, the Greek being this, ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν. This we believe to be a point very needful to know and consider as mainly affecting and determining our view of the passage, which, if we read it as a whole, is as follows, "Else," says the apostle, connecting our resurrection with the resurrection of Christ, "what shall they do which are baptized over the dead, if the dead rise not at all? why are they then baptized over the dead?"

And now for our proposed interpretation, which we shall preface by quoting the following passage, "Man being in honor abideth not; he is like, the beasts that perish. This their way is their folly; yet their posterity approve their sayings. Like sheep they are laid in the grave; death shall feed on them; and the upright shall have dominion over them in the morning; and their beauty shall consume in the grave from their dwelling. But God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave; for he shall receive me." (Psa. 49:12-15.) Such is the doom of the wicked, of those who are morally dead, and at a distance from God. They go down to the grave and their memorial perishes with them; unlike those who have part in the first resurrection, these shall not live again till the thousand years of Christ's reign have expired. (Rev. 20:5.) While, others are reigning in life, they, and some of them kings in their day, shall lie dishonored, and mouldering in the dust of the earth, their doom at the end, at the resurrection of judgment, being the lake of fire and brimstone forever. How different this from our hope. "God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave, for he shall receive me" we may triumphantly echo in the words of the Psalm quoted above, contrasting our lot with the fearful condition of those who live and die without hope. "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" Such is our song even now in the midst of this death-stricken world.' Thus, then, in accordance with this, standing in the midst of a vast cemetery, as it were, where the dead of past ages lie mouldering beneath him, the very soil under his feet being, so to speak, composed of their ashes, the saint, himself an exception to the general order of men, by a simple act on his part, declares himself to be dead to, the world, the flesh, and the devil, but alive at the same time to God, expresses his hope in, and at the same time, his union with, Christ, the mighty deliverer from death.

This act is that of passing through the waters of baptism. Others around him are dead, mortal, as to the body, morally dead as to the soul; hence even sow in the apprehension by faith of his entire emancipation from the bondage of death, and at the same time the dominion which hereafter he is to have over those who, alas! have gone down to the grave without hope, he from the high and holy elevation, the vantage ground which God's grace has assigned him, looks down on a world beneath him all lying in ruins, all doomed to hopeless mortality, and in this spirit goes through the ordinance; which tells out what he is, a man in resurrection, one risen and ascended in spirit with, Christ. In the words of the passage before us, he is BAPTIZED OVER THE DEAD-THE DEAD OVER WHOM HE WILL IN THE LAST DAY HAVE DOMINION.

Such is the meaning, I believe, of this passage, and is it not, I ask, more simple and natural than that which is commonly given—more in harmony with the truth brought out in this chapter? the object of which is to draw a contrast between the destiny of those dead in sin, and those alive in the Spirit; even the elect Church of God, and the unregenerate world—between the hopes of those who expect to be caught up to meet the Lord in the air, to attain unto the resurrection from amongst the -dead, and the sad and hopeless condition of such as belong to this world. As an illustration of what I have shown, may we not say of the elect in the days of Nob, that as the ark wherein they were sheltered floated in safety over the multitudes of those who were lost in the flood, they, in a sense, were "BAPTIZED OVER THE DEAD?" And again, of the children of Israel who were baptized unto Moses in the cloud and the sea, may we not say that as they lifted up their voices in triumph over their Egyptian pursuers, as these lay conquered and dead on the shore, the baptism which they passed through was a BAPTISM OVER THE DEAD?

Then there is another point. Knowing that they surely shall rise, the saints, in the fifteenth 1 Corinthians are represented not only as passing through the waters of baptism, but also as willing, if needs be, to pass for, Christ's sake through the fires of persecution, to die in His cause. "Why stand we," says the apostle, "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." (1 Cor. 15:30-32.) Here we have a further, a second testimony, in the persons and acts of the saints, to the truth of the doctrine of resurrection. This, I believe, is needful to notice, because we may easily confound the act of being baptized over the dead, in verse 29, with that of suffering for Christ's sake, spoken of in the above-cited verses; whereas, I believe, though closely connected of course, they are distinct things altogether—the one being the first act of the saint in his course (at least, so it' should be), the other the continuous suffering, the hourly jeopardy, the dying daily, the refusal to eat and drink like the world, which, of necessity, follows the confession of the name of the crucified Jesus.

And here, in addition to the first part of this subject—namely, what I have suggested with regard to verse 29—let me observe that this victory of the saints over death is in harmony with that which Christ Himself in the end will achieve. He triumphed, we know, when He Himself rose from the grave: He will triumph again when His Church shall be raised: but not till "the last enemy, Death," is banished forever beyond the precincts of the new heavens and new earth, will His conquest be perfect. It was defilement in Israel to touch a dead body, a bone, or a grave (Num. 19); and hence, during the millennium, this earth, however pleasant and fair it may be, will not be perfectly pure. No; because death, the sad witness of sin, will be there: they who shall have no part in the first resurrection, the nations of those who are lost, will continue still to pollute it. But, in the end, this death-defiled world will be wholly dissolved not annihilated, I say, but dissolved—yes, and in the very act of dissolving (so at least to me it appears), unable to hide them from the all-searching eye of their Judge, it will give up its dead to be finally punished, to be cast into the lake of fire forever. After which, out of identically the same materials, those atoms of which it was formed at first, now thoroughly purged from the least trace of mortality, even to a dead leaf or an insect, the new everlasting earth will be formed. This I believe to be an explanation of the following 'passage a "I saw a great 'white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them.. And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God: and the books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hades (ᾗδης) delivered up the dead which were in them; and they were judged every man according to their works: and death and hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And whose-ever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire. And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away s and there was no, more sea." (Rev. 20:11, &c.)

With regard to this passage, if it were otherwise than what, I have stated above—if this earth is to be annihilated, instead of being dissolved, and then made anew, as I have said, the power of Christ in redemption would, in this instance, be foiled.. But no, it will not, I believe, it cannot, be so. This earth, just as much as our bodies, is redeemed by His blood; and hence, though dissolved, like the body when sown in corruption, like the body again, when raised in His likeness, it will know in the end the full power of His resurrection. Hence the new earth, and, let me add, the new heavens, in like manner, will be the very same heavens and earth which we see around us at present, purged by the fires of the last day from every trace of corruption and death.

And here, in conclusion, I would offer what to me seems an explanation of the two above passages. First, "death and hades (ᾗδης) delivered up the dead which were in them" (Rev. 20:1 3): secondly, "Death and hades Were east into the lake of fire." (Rev. 20:14.) Hades, we know, is the place of the soul in its unclothed and separate state—the grave, that of the body while under the power of death. This passage then applies, as I take it, to their re-union and final destruction—I mean of the bodies and souls of the wicked. The body (death's prisoner) being called from the grave (death here by a figure being put for the grave), the soul, on the other hand, being summoned from hades, to be united forever, and forever tormented.

Such is the doom of this world. Filled, as it is, with itself, its wisdom, its glory, its many inventions, such is its terrible end. Such, however, is not the lot of the righteous. We, even we (blessed thought!) rare the children of God, joint-heirs also with Him who is Heir of all things both in heaven and in earth, and, as such, conquerors, like Him, over death and the wave. Well, then, may we, as we turn from the thought of the judgment, which is to finish the drama of this world's history, and look up to heaven, our birth-place, our, home, where we are to dwell forever with Him—well, then, I say, with such a hope in our souls, may we echo the sweet words of the poet, and sing—

His be the Victor's name, Who fought the fight alone; Triumphant saints no honor claim, His conquest was their own. He hell in hell laid low; Made sin, He sin o'erthrew; Bow'd to the grave, and killed it so, And death, by dying slew. Bless, bless the Conqueror slain, Slain by divine decree, Who lived, who died, who lives again—For thee, His saint, for thee!

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