



# Truth

## On Tough Texts

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A MINISTRY OF GRACE BIBLE CHURCH

ISSUE 30 (January 2008)

### *Reader Questions (1)*

#### Selected Texts

**W**E HAVE RECENTLY RECEIVED SEVERAL questions from readers on various “tough texts” of Scripture. Most of these are questions that do not demand a full article to answer, so we are dedicating this issue of TOTT to such reader questions. This also serves as a good follow-up to our recent study of interpreting Scripture.

We are dubbing this article with a “(1)” in the title because as other questions come in, we will dedicate other issues to them as well. Our thanks to each one of you who wrote, and we hope that this will generate questions from others.

#### *“Baptized for the Dead” (I Cor. 15:29)*

**Question:** What is the “baptism for the dead” referred to in I Corinthians 15:29? I know that Mormons teach that baptism is a saving ordinance; because many have died before baptism, those now living must be baptized for them if they are going to be saved. *I know this is wrong.* Please expound on this passage. I have read the context and cannot see where/how it fits. (CW in Missouri)

**Answer:** Here is probably the most controversial verse in the entire Bible: **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?** It has bothered many a Bible reader. There have actually been upwards of 200 explanations of its meaning, many heretical, but others legitimate possibilities. Here are just a few.

As you pointed out, it simply *cannot* refer to “proxy baptism.” Paul would have immediately condemned

such a practice. If baptism cannot save a *living* person, it certainly cannot save a *dead* one. Long before Joseph Smith came up with this idea, it was adopted by ancient Gnostic apostates such as Marcion, and it is just as apostate today as it was then.

There is also evidence of such vicarious “baptism” among ancient pagans. Because of the presence of so much error in the Corinthian church, some of which came from pagans, some interpreters think that it’s possible that some in that church had adopted this error, since Paul uses the term **they**, not “we.”

One of the plausible interpretations is that the term “the dead” refers to the Lord Jesus in His death, the plural being used for the singular, meaning “the dead one.”

Another is that the word “baptized” simply refers to the idea of washing, cleansing, purifying (Matt. 8:4; Heb. 9:10), and so pictures the dead being carefully washed and purified when buried, with the hope of the resurrection, and, as it were, preparatory of that.

Because one of the meanings of the Greek word behind **for** (*huper*) is “because of,” others think Paul is simply saying that people were being saved (baptism being the sign) because of the exemplary lives and witness of faithful believers who had died.

Still another view is that this might mean that a Christian friend was baptized for symbolic effect on behalf of a new convert who had died before being able to be baptized (perhaps by martyrdom or perhaps on his or her deathbed).

One other view says that this phrase means “baptized to take the place of those who have died.” In other words, if there is no resurrection, why bother to witness

and win others to Christ? Why reach sinners who are then baptized and take the place of those who have died? If the Christian life is only a “dead-end street,” get off it.

Well, we could go on, but the view that I lean toward (which is similar to the one immediately above) is well stated by William MacDonald in his wonderful single-volume, *The Believer's Bible Commentary*, and held by others:

The interpretation which seems to suit the context best is this: At the time Paul wrote, there was fierce persecution against those who took a public stand for Christ. This persecution was especially vicious at the time of their baptism. It often happened that those who publicly proclaimed their faith in Christ in the waters of baptism were martyred shortly thereafter. But did this stop others from being saved and from taking their place in baptism? Not at all. It seemed as though there were always new replacements coming along to fill up the ranks of those who had been martyred. As they stepped into the waters of baptism, in a very real sense **they** were being **baptized for**, or *in the place of* (Greek *huper*) the dead. Hence **the dead** here refers to those who died as a result of their bold witness for Christ. Now the apostle's argument here is that it would be foolish to be thus baptized to fill up the ranks of those who had died if there is no such thing as resurrection from the dead. It would be like sending replacement troops to fill up the ranks of an army that is fighting a lost cause. It would be like fighting on in a hopeless situation. **If the dead do not rise at all, why then are they baptized for the dead?**<sup>1</sup>

### ***“Born of Water and Spirit” (Jn. 3:3-6)***

**Question:** What does being born of the *water* and the Spirit mean in John 3:3-6? (BH in Missouri)

**Answer:** Several “interpretations” have been offered: (1) it refers to baptism as a requirement for salvation. This, however, would contradict many other New Testament passages that speak of grace alone (e.g., Eph. 2:8-9); (2) it stands for the act of repentance that John the Baptist's baptism signified; (3) it refers to natural birth (specifically, the fluid released when the amniotic sac breaks prior to labor); thus it means “unless one is born the first time by water and the second time by the Spirit”; (4) it means the Word of God, as in John 15:3; (5) it is a synonym for the Holy Spirit and may be translated, “by water, even the Spirit.”

I tend toward the simplicity of #3 simply because the context, verse 4, *specifically* refers to physical birth. Further, it cannot possibly refer to baptism because not only is baptism not required for salvation, but also because baptism had not yet been given or commanded

when Jesus spoke these words. In short, I believe our Lord is simply saying, “Physical birth is not enough; one must be born again spiritually to enter the kingdom of heaven.” In fact, that very contrast between “flesh” and “spirit” is then made in verse 6! In my view, any other interpretation violates the context and is looking for some deeper meaning that simply is not in the text.

### ***On Which Day of the Week Did Jesus Die?***

**Question:** Based on Matthew 12:40, where Jesus says He would be **three days and three nights in the heart of the earth**, on what day of the week did He die? I have been reading some who object to the idea of a Friday crucifixion. (DP in Missouri)

**Answer:** This verse has caused many over the years to wonder. Some teachers, in fact, make a *huge* issue of it, going so far as to make it alone pivotal concerning the day of Jesus' death. Actually, the issue is not at all serious because of Jewish history and time rendering. To get the whole picture, we will note two things.

*First*, the Old Testament contains two kinds of prophecy regarding Christ. One is the “verbally predictive,” in which specific and sometimes detailed predictions are given. Such prophecies include those that the Christ would be born of a virgin (Isa. 7:14), that He would be a descendant of David who would rule the entire earth with justice and righteousness (Jer. 23:5), and that He would be born in Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2).

The second type of messianic prophecy is “typical,” in which an Old Testament person or event foreshadowed the person or work of Christ. We can be certain of typical predictions only if they are specifically identified as such in the New Testament. Here Jesus Himself tells us that Jonah's spending **three days and three nights in the whale's belly**; before he was vomited up on the shore typified the burial of **the Son of Man**, for **three days and three nights in the heart of the earth** before His resurrection. It was a predictive prophecy in picture rather than in specific word. Just as Jonah was buried in the depths of the sea, Jesus was buried in the depths of the earth; and just as Jonah came out of the great fish after three days, Jesus came out of the grave after three days.

Jesus obviously believed in the full literalness of the biblical account of Jonah. If Jonah had not been literally swallowed and miraculously protected while submerged for **three days and three nights in the whale's belly**, that event could not have typified Jesus' literal burial and resurrection. In light of Jonah's hardhearted stubbornness, it is not difficult to believe that he would lie about his experience; but it is difficult indeed to believe that Jesus would join Jonah in such duplicity or be mistaken about the historicity of the story. In declaring Jonah's experience to be a type of His own burial and res-

urrection, Jesus also verified the authenticity of Jonah's account of himself.

*Second*, the matter of **three days and three nights** is often used either to prove Jesus was mistaken about the time He would actually spend in the tomb or that He could not have been crucified on Friday afternoon and raised early on Sunday, the first day of the week. But such elaborate schemes are silly and pointless. Just as in modern usage, the phrase "day and night" can mean not only a full 24-hour day but also any representative part of a day. For example, let us say that my family and I went to a neighboring town on Monday. We went in the morning and came home after dark, *but this was not a 24-hour period*. In the same way, Jesus' use of **three days and three nights** does not have to be interpreted as 72 hours, three full 24-hour days; in fact, *it should not be interpreted that way*. Why? Because *it is an absolute fact* that the Jewish Talmud (commentaries on the Law) held that "any part of a day is as the whole." *Jesus was simply using a common, well-understood generalization*.

A similar expression in Luke 13:32-33 is another example, in fact. As Jesus weeps over Jerusalem, we read, "The same day there came certain of the Pharisees, saying unto him, Get thee out, and depart hence: for Herod will kill thee. And he said unto them, Go ye, and tell that fox, Behold, I cast out devils, and I do cures **to day and to morrow, and the third day** I shall be perfected. Nevertheless I must walk to day, and to morrow, and the day following: for it cannot be that a prophet perish out of Jerusalem." This expression signified only that Christ was on His own divine timetable; it was not meant to lay out a literal three-day schedule. Again, *expressions like this were common in Semitic usage*, and were rarely employed in a literal sense to specify precise intervals of time.

At any rate, I hope that clears up the matter for you. Some Bible teachers make mountains out of molehills. There are issues that are *far more* crucial in our day than one such as this that is so simply answered by understanding biblical history. In fact, *much* false interpretation in our day comes from such ignorance. History is one of the most important principles of biblical interpretation.

### "Guardian Angels"

**Question:** I ran across a verse in the Bible during a group Bible study; I should have written it down, but didn't. It talked about angels watching over us. I asked if all people are protected by the angels or just the elect. No one knew the answer to this question. One person suggested everyone but then they said "everyone who is saved has stories from early-on knowing of God" but she wasn't sure that question could be answered. (JP in Colorado)

**Answer:** The term angel is obviously a transliteration of the Greek *angelos*. As far back as Homer, it simply refers to "a messenger," but the role of such a messenger was sacred, and he was supposedly under the special protection of the gods.<sup>2</sup>

While such pagan concepts have no basis in Scripture, neither do some of the misconceptions that arose in Judaism. Many Jews, for example, believed that angels form a council that God consults before doing anything. Many also believed that various angels control the stars, seas, rain, snow, and other such things. Still others believed that "recording angels" write down everything people say and that every nation and child has a "guardian angel."

The latter idea is still popular in our day, no doubt as a result not only of Jewish tradition, but also from the writings of Thomas Aquinas, who was notorious for mixing human philosophy (especially Aristotle) with Christian thought. In his view, before birth each person is protected by the mother's guardian angel and then has his or her own assigned at birth.<sup>3</sup>

Scripture, however, nowhere says such things. What *It does* say, we find in Hebrews 1:14, for example: "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?" We also read in Matthew 18:10: "Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven." What we see here is that angels serve believers collectively (as the pronoun "their" is collective). The picture is that they are always looking at the face of God so as to hear His command to help believers.

Henry Morris well sums up: "They accomplish their ministry on behalf of the heirs of salvation in various ways, including: instruction (Acts 10:3-6), deliverance (Psalm 34:7; 91:11), comfort (Matthew 1:20; Luke 22:43) and, finally, reception at death (Luke 16:22). They were created to be ministering spirits, continually sent forth to minister (that is, serve) those who shall be heirs of salvation."<sup>4</sup>

[Taken from the author's book, *A Word for the Day: Daily Readings on Bible Words* (AMG Publishers)].

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995), p. 1807.

<sup>2</sup> Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1964), Vol. I, p. 74.

<sup>3</sup> *Summa Theologica*, Part I, question 113.

<sup>4</sup> *Defender's Study Bible* (Heb. 1:14).

The Lord had made Noah serenely bear witness against iniquity; yea, even to sit on the throne and condemn the world. Noah never seems to have entered into any dispute with the men of his times. He never argued or caviled [discussed]; much less did he wish them ill. He simply believed and told them the truth, kept his faith intact, and went on building his ark—he practiced what he believed. Doing this he condemned those who criticized him. Worldlings, you may laugh, but the man of God is your master after all. His preaching condemned them. They know the way and wickedly refused to run in it. His *warning* condemned them. They would not regard it and escape. His *life* condemned them, for he walked with the God whom they despised. Most of all the *ark* condemned them. Did none of them ever say, “This is the strangest fabric that ever was. In all the world there is not another thing like this. Yet Noah is no fool. The man is cool and calm, shrewd and sharp. He has bought as well as any man could. How is that on this matter of this strange structure that he is so strange?” Did not such men at times think that there must be something in what Noah said after all? If they did not think so, at any rate the fact that Noah carried out his principles to the full, and invested all he had in the building of this strange ark, should have forced them to conviction if they had not been hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. Oh, how his *faith* condemned them! When the floods began to rise up, and when the door was shut, how the sight of that floating ark must have condemned them!

Charles Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening II. The Fifty Greatest Christian Classics Series, Vol. I* (Lafayette: Sovereign Grace Trust Fund, 1990), p. 202.

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This monthly publication is intended to address Scriptures that have historically been debated, are particularly difficult to understand, or have generated questions among Believers. We hope it will be an encouragement and challenge to God’s people to carefully examine and discern Truth. While the positions presented here are based on years of careful Biblical research, we recognize that other respected men of God differ.

If you have a question that perplexes you, please send it along so that we might address it either in an article or in our “Q & A” section. Other comments are also warmly welcomed, and letters to the editor will be published.

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