

1 & 2 Peter: Faith Under Fire

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!

According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

(1 Peter 1:3-5 ESV)

Baptism Which Corresponds To This

December 9th, 2018

1 Peter 3:18-22

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Introduction:

Good morning church! I want to invite you to open your Bibles this morning to 1 Peter 3:18; that's on page 1016 in your pew Bibles. This passage is intimately and logically connected to the passage we read last week. Last week we were talking about witnessing from the margins. The original readers of this letter were suffering social and financial harassment. They weren't yet being hung on crosses or being fed to the lions – but things were getting tough and Peter is writing to them, in part to encourage them to STAY IN THE FIELD. Remember, Peter wrote this letter around the year AD 62 – church history tells us that no one in this region suffered formal and fatal persecution until AD 112 – that means there was 50 years of useful evangelism to be had if only these folks would maintain their courage and resolve. And so Peter is using every tool in his pastoral toolbox. In verse 18 he reminds them of the example of Christ. He says:

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God (1 Peter 3:18 ESV)

That's the logical connection between these paragraphs. Peter is saying to those folks – it has always been costly to bring friends and loved ones to the place of salvation. It has always required you to pay a social, financial and sometimes even a physical price. Jesus paid a price to bring you to God – and you will have to pay a price to see your friends and loved ones come to God.

That's the basic idea in this text – but there is a bit of a landmine on our way to a very helpful Old Testament metaphor¹ that Peter uses to further make this point. In fact verse 19 is generally considered one of THE MOST confusing and debated verses in all the Bible. So we have to DIFUSE that landmine in order to make our way toward one of the most common biblical metaphors for our salvation and for the task of evangelism – Peter is using it in both senses here. So we'll read the text, we'll attempt to navigate the minefield and then we'll attempt to profit from the metaphor. Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 18:

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit (1 Peter 3:18 ESV)

Now – I just want to pause here and appreciate this little one verse summary of the central act of our redemption. I've already mentioned that Peter is referring to the suffering of Christ by way of motivation – meaning this passage isn't really about the death and resurrection of Jesus – Peter is simply referring to those things to make his point that bringing people to God is costly business – but ultimately rewarding. That's his point – but this little verse is one of the best short summaries of the Gospel in all the Bible.

Peter says that Jesus suffered once – his work was definitive and it was complete.

He also says that Jesus suffered FOR SINS; that is his death was substitutionary and penal in nature. Jesus died for sins – the implication there being that sin really does separate people from a holy God – not all Christians believe that any more – not all pastors believe that any more – but here it is in the text. The text says that Jesus suffered FOR SIN – but not his own, Peter says it was a case of a righteous person suffering on behalf of unrighteous persons. In other words the death of Jesus was SUBSTITUTIONARY. He SUFFERED FOR OUR SINS.

That's the Gospel!

God treated Jesus as if he had lived my life. And then if I am united to Christ through faith, God will treat ME as if I had lived Jesus' life!

¹ Metaphor: “a thing regarded as representative or symbolic of something else, especially something abstract.”

That is the Great Exchange!

That is the heart of the heart of the heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ – thanks be to God!

That isn't the really the point here – but we can't just walk by a verse like that and not slow down and appreciate what it's saying.

Now let's jump back into the text. We'll read the rest of it and then we'll try and sort it out. So Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit:

in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, 20 because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. 21 Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, 22 who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him. (1 Peter 3:19–22 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Alright I mentioned that there is a bit of a minefield to navigate before arriving at the central metaphor in the text. So let's try to get into this minefield and make our way safely to the other side.

Into The Minefield:

As I mentioned verses 19-20 are generally considered among the most complicated verses in all the Bible. Martin Luther was bold enough to admit that he had no idea what was going on here. He says:

'A wonderful text is this, and a more obscure passage perhaps than any other in the New Testament, so that I do not know for a certainty just what Peter means.'²

²As cited in Edmund P. Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter*, ed. John R. W. Stott, *The Bible Speaks Today*. Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove.: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 156.

Now the good news here is that the central metaphor that we are working towards here is not complicated – so you are going to go home with some very useful and very trustworthy content regardless of how well we do with these two verses – but we do have to do our best to get there and we have more help than Luther had. People have been wrestling with these words for almost 500 years since Luther and I do think we've made some progress although there are still good people who hold to slightly different interpretations – but all I can do is tell you what I think these verses mean. So let's walk slowly and carefully and we'll do our best. Look at verse 19. Peter says:

in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison

Now the “in which” there refers back to “in the Spirit” at the end of verse 18. Jesus did something “in the Spirit”. He went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison.

What does that mean?

This is where things get confusing. There are some people who think that this means that Jesus went to hell and preached to people in hell and offered them a chance for repentance. The Roman Catholics believe a version of that. They think this means that Jesus went in the Spirit to preach to righteous people who repented of their sins as the water was falling in the days of Noah but who missed their chance to get in the boat. They went to purgatory, which is like a preparatory version of hell; and now after his death, Jesus goes and preaches the Gospel in purgatory and many people believe and are saved.

Some others believe that this means that Jesus went in the Spirit to preach to ANGELS who are in prison – in angel hell – and that he told them what he had accomplished on the cross – not for their salvation but rather for their further condemnation.

However, neither of those interpretations seem compatible with what we see in the rest of the Bible – they are grammatically possible HERE but they would stick out like a sore thumb in comparison to everything else we read in the Bible. Nowhere else in the Bible does it talk about people getting a second chance to repent and believe in Jesus after death. And nowhere else in the Bible do we find Jesus preaching to angels – fallen or otherwise. When there is Gospel preaching

happening in the Bible – the focus is always on men and women, boys and girls. People hear preaching and hearing, people get saved. And that seems to be what’s going on in this paragraph. Look again at verse 18:

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God (1 Peter 3:18 ESV)

US is people! Right? So Peter is focused on human beings here, not angels, and he is speaking about the eternal destinies of human beings, not the eternal destiny of angels. Therefore the most likely interpretation here is that Peter is saying that Jesus was preaching to people, through Noah at the time of the flood – most of whom rejected the message which is why they are now in hell. I think that is what Peter is saying here and that is why the New American Standard Bible translates this verse:

1 Peter 3:19 (NASB)

¹⁹ in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison,

So the message of this text isn’t that Jesus preached the Gospel to angels, and it isn’t that he went to purgatory to preach to the spirits of people, it is that in the days of Noah when Noah was preaching to people telling them to turn from sin and to save themselves from their wicked generation, the Spirit of Jesus was there, in the preaching, pleading with those people to be saved. Wayne Grudem for example says:

Christ was preaching through Noah when the ark was being built.³

Now, Peter has already told us back in chapter 1 that Jesus was actually the Spirit of prophecy back in the Old Testament. In chapter 1:11 he said that the Old Testament prophets were saying stuff through the Spirit of Christ that they didn’t fully understand. So Peter is telling his people that all true preaching – Old Testament and New – is done through the Spirit of Christ. If it saves people then Christ was in it. He was preaching a sermon INSIDE whatever it was Noah was saying or later Isaiah or Jonah or whomever. It was the CHRIST INSIDE that that caused people to be saved.

³ Wayne Grudem, 1 Peter; TNTC Volume 17 (Downers Grove Illinois: IVP Academic, 1988), 166.

So the message here in this landmine is that when Noah was preaching – Jesus was there in it – pleading with men and women to come into the ark and be saved. God allowed that time period to stretch out for quite a while – you don't an ark on the weekend – it was a long slow process during which Christ was making his appeal to PEOPLE through the preaching of Noah.

Edmund Clowney takes a similar approach when he says:

While the ark was being built, the possibility of escape from judgment existed for human beings, not for fallen angels.² The patience of God was directed to the sinners of Noah's generation, those to whom Noah preached righteousness (2 Pet. 2:5).⁴

With that difficulty out of the way, I think we are ready not to deal with the central metaphor of the text.

Into The Metaphor:

Look again at verse 21. Peter says:

Baptism, which corresponds to this (1 Peter 3:21 ESV)

Peter uses the Greek word *antitupos* which gives us our English word “anti-type”. Type and antitype are Greek words which originally referred to the making of coins. The antitype was the stamp and the type was the coin produced by the stamp. The New Testament apostles use the term to refer to the fact that the SHAPE and PATTERN of Old Testament redemption stories is STAMPED upon the climactic redemption story of Jesus Christ. Those stories SHAPE our understanding of THE STORY – does that make sense? This is all over the New Testament. Paul can talk about how the salvation that is ours in Christ is LIKE the Passover or LIKE the Exodus – here Peter is saying that our BAPTISM is LIKE the story of the flood.

Peter is saying that the flood provides a useful pattern for thinking about our salvation and our calling to evangelize our friends and neighbours.

⁴Edmund P. Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter*, ed. John R. W. Stott, *The Bible Speaks Today*. Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove.: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 162.

Now, we want to carefully notice that Peter is not saying that the actual act of baptism saves us – in fact he tries very hard to make that clear. He says: “NOT as a removal of dirt from the body” – not as a mere external act – “but as an appeal to God for a good conscience.”

Are you hearing that?

Because I think we need to hear that. Evangelicals today tend to undervalue the ordinances and sacraments of the church. We think of them AS MERELY MEMORIAL. Meaning ALL THEY DO is remind us of other things – and it’s the OTHER THINGS that really matter.

But that’s not what Peter is saying here. He is saying that BAPTISM SAVES YOU – not if you do it as a mere ritual. But if you do it AS AN APPEAL TO GOD then it saves you.

Are you hearing that?

He is saying that if you understand what this is – if you OWN IT – if you go under the water saying: O God! I know my sins deserve death, but I know that Jesus died for me and rose again for my salvation! O God let his death be my death. Let his life be my life. Forgive my sins and raise me up to eternal life on the last day – if you are thinking that and saying that – or some version of that - while you are baptized – then it saves you.

Listen to me friends – properly understood – BAPTISM IS THE SINNER’S PRAYER.

It is an appeal to God for a clean conscience – that’s what Peter says.

Thanks be to God!

Baptism is the essential expression of the Christian faith and it has many useful points of comparison with the Old Testament flood. That’s what Peter is saying, now let’s trace it out. Let me suggest 5 points of significant correspondence between Noah’s flood and our salvation and calling.

First of all, just as in the days of Noah:

1. We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, because of Christ alone

Let me take you back to Genesis 6:7-8:

So the LORD said, “I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast, creeping thing and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.”⁸ But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD. (Genesis 6:7–8 NKJV)

In the flood story we are told that people had become totally evil, entirely rebellious and deserving of judgment – but Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord. Grace means help. God helped Noah – he helped him to believe and believing he was saved and being saved he obeyed and served God gladly.

That’s the Gospel – right? Old Testament and New.

Noah was saved by grace and he took hold of that salvation by faith, as the author of Hebrews makes clear:

By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household... and became an heir of the **righteousness that comes by faith**. (Hebrews 11:7 ESV)

Noah believed what God said and God had said something very interesting to Noah back in Genesis 6:18. He said:

But I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons’ wives with you. (Genesis 6:18 ESV)

The Hebrew phrase there is *heqim berit* - “establish my covenant”, which Peter Gentry explains

“refers to a covenant partner fulfilling an obligation or upholding **a promise in a covenant initiated previously**...”⁵

So God says that he will save Noah because of a promise he had made and a covenant he had initiated previously. What promise could God be referring to? In fact it is the first promise in the Bible. It is what scholars refer to as “the *prot-evangelion*” or “the first giving of the Gospel”. It’s found in Genesis 3:15:

⁵ Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, Kingdom Through Covenant (Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 2012), 155.

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel. (Genesis 3:15 ESV)

It was a promise God made to the devil, actually. God promised the devil that a child would come, born of a woman, and he would CRUSH the devil and bring God's people home – at some cost to himself.

That was the promise that saved Noah's family.

The promise that Jesus would come and do for us what we could never do for ourselves.

To preserve that promise God saved a remnant, by grace, through faith, because of Jesus Christ. Old Testament and New – that's how people are saved.

Secondly, just as in the days of Noah:

2. We have responded to the Spirit of Christ through the preaching of the Gospel

Peter says in verse 19 that Christ in the Spirit was preaching the Gospel in the days of Noah. In 2 Peter he says that Noah was:

a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood on the world of the ungodly (2 Peter 2:5 NKJV)

Noah wasn't just a boat builder he was a Gospel preacher! He preached a Gospel of righteousness through faith, if we put this text together with Hebrews 11:7 – he was preaching the Gospel, but more importantly, Christ was preaching the Gospel, in the Spirit, through him.

Peter wants us to reflect on the fact that our salvation is just like that.

That's how people get saved still today, he says. They hear the voice of God, they respond to the Spirit of Christ, through the preaching of the Gospel. The Apostle Paul says this too in Romans 10, he says:

So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. (Romans 10:17 ESV)

Do you hear that? The Word of Christ is the knocking of Jesus upon the human heart **INSIDE** of the preaching of the Word. That's how people get saved! The Word washes over them and the Spirit of Christ works within them and leads them to salvation.

That's how it was in the days of Noah, and that's how it was for us. If you are saved then you know exactly what I'm talking about. Somebody was washing you in the Word – maybe your mom, your grandma, your roommate or a pastor. Somebody was washing you in the Word and inside that you heard the voice of Christ. He grabbed you. He slayed you. He knocked you down and picked you up and carried you across the threshold of salvation.

That's how it happens, Peter says, Old Testament and New.

A third point of comparison would be this; just as in the days of Noah:

3. We have to die to the world and shut ourselves in Christ in order to be saved

Noah had to die to the world. He had to shut himself into the ark. Salvation unto God meant separation from the damned - necessarily. Calvin says in his commentary on this passage:

As Noah, then, obtained life through death, when in the ark, he was enclosed not otherwise than as it were in the grave, and when the whole world perished, he was preserved together with his small family; so at this day, the death which is set forth in baptism, is to us an entrance into life, nor can salvation be hoped for, except we be separated from the world.⁶

Do not be deceived, my friends, there is no salvation to God that is not also death to the world. You can't live to Christ and live to this world. And that's ok, because this world and its desires are passing away but our citizenship is in a far better country.

Noah knew this and so should every man and every woman who passes through the waters of baptism.

⁶ John Calvin, *Hebrews, 1 Peter, 1 John, James, II Peter, Jude*, Calvin's Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 117.

Fourthly, just as in the days of Noah:

4. We must be active and urgent in calling people to repentance

The whole time Noah was building the ark he was also preaching repentance. He was inviting people to save themselves from the wrath to come. It took him a long time to build that boat – not because he was a bad builder but because God is a patient God. Peter says that in verse 20; he talks about the time:

when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared (1 Peter 3:20 ESV)

God wanted a slow process – he designed it to be slow because he wanted to keep the door of salvation open for as long as possible. Peter says the same is true of God still today:

The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. (2 Peter 3:9 ESV)

God is patient because he does not wish any to perish. He designs a slow process, he waits, but then, finally, after enough time has past, he shuts the door. The Bible says that in Genesis 7:

those that entered, male and female of all flesh, went in as God had commanded him. And the Lord shut him in. (Genesis 7:16 ESV)

This opportunity - this door will not be open forever. Peter warns people about that. He says:

the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. (2 Peter 3:10 ESV)

Peter heard that first from Jesus. Jesus said:

For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 38 For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, 39 and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. (Matthew 24:37–39 ESV)

A lot of people won't listen to you, they are going to be busy doing other stuff – BUT YOU NEED TO KEEP PREACHING! You need to keep calling on people to come inside and to hide themselves in Christ – because one day, we don't know when, but one day, God will shut that door and all those who remain outside will perish under the flood of his wrath – forever.

So, be active and urgent in calling people to salvation.

And finally, just as in the days of Noah; we too will suffer...

5. We will suffer ridicule and rejection as we extend this invitation to others

This last point brings us out of Peter's illustration and back into his main point. His main point is that this world is coming to an end and the folks around us by and large are not interested in what we are selling. But some of them will be. Some precious few will hear and believe and enter and be saved and because of that we need to keep doing what Jesus told us to be doing.

Will there be a cost?

Of course there will be a cost!

There was for Jesus – there was for Noah. There will always be a cost – Jesus told us to EXPECT A COST. He said:

In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world. (John 16:33 ESV)

Jesus has been calling and gathering people into his salvation for a very long time indeed. He knows the process inside and out. He was doing this BACK IN THE DAYS OF NOAH. He was doing this back in the days of Peter – and he is doing it right now – by his Spirit – in us as we wash our friends and loved ones in the Word.

They may not listen – sometimes only 8 people get in the boat – sometimes more – but always at a cost.

No matter.

God is in control. Eternity awaits and the Lord knows how to reward and vindicate his people.

So carry on church – keep calling out to your generation despite the gathering storm.

This is our mission, this is our encouragement and this is the Word of the Lord. Let's pray together.