

## *Determined to Finish*

1 Peter 3:18-22

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We turn this morning to the Book of 1 Peter. And if you are visiting with us, I will say that you need not have been here for the sermons previously in the Book of 1 Peter. We seek for them to hold together but also, in their own way, to be standalone. Having said that, we did design the series around 1 Peter so that this passage would fall on this Sunday, as it is one in which Peter draws our attention to both the work of Christ on Good Friday, the work of the cross, but also the power of the resurrection. Having said that, I must acknowledge to you that there will be a portion of this passage in the middle which, if you're paying attention, you will say, "I have no idea what that means." The good news is, we're not going to be talking about that this morning. That's for a different Sunday, because I don't have enough time. But it is to say, there is a way through it, but not today.

So with that said, we're going to draw our attention specifically to these two points, two points in this passage which focus us on the work of Christ on the cross and the work of his resurrection. And recognizing, it is God's desire for us to know of his determination to finish—to finish the work for our salvation. Not that, however, we simply receive it as those who are somewhere outside of it all, but those who are participants in it, and what that looks like. So let's listen to God's Word this morning, 1 Peter 3:18-22.

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, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, 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. 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, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him. [ESV]

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me again?

Heavenly Father, we come before you and we ask that you, as our good Heavenly Father, that you would speak to us through this, your Word, which points us to Christ who is the Word of God, the Word made flesh. And you have, through your Son, testified to us your ways, your determination to bring salvation. And that is recorded for us here in these Scriptures. And so we would ask by the power of your Holy Spirit that you would open our eyes, open our hearts and our minds, to hear what it is you are saying to us. Help us we pray, and help the teacher. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

As some of you know, there has been a large section of my life where I was a serious, yet amateur, but serious competitive cyclist. I had come back to competitive cycling for about two years before I decided to enter back into what they call stage racing, where it is a multi-day stage race. The winner is based on the overall, cumulative time at the end of a few days. And so in 2006, I had the opportunity, now, to enter into my second stage race in a couple of years, and I took my family with me along with my teammate, training partner, member of my church, and his family.

On the second day of this stage race, it was 56-mile road race which was to begin at a ski station in the green mountains of Vermont and then make our way over across the border into New York. It happened to be on a day, however, that involved a tropical depression. It was a tropical storm that came

into the Mid-Atlantic region and went into New York and New Jersey and then hugged the border between Vermont and New York. It was a part of the same system that had caused great flooding and death that was Katrina. And so we were beginning that race in a driving, pouring rain. My wife, Kate, dropped us off at the top of this ski station. It took us about five seconds to be completely, dripping wet.

We got onto our bikes, along with 75 others who were in our category, and we descended inside the yellow line on one side of the road in driving rain. Halfway through the race we make a right and we climb over the green mountains into the state of New York. And by the time we finished the top of the mountain, it then stopped raining and then became very high winds—so much so that it was blowing cyclists off the road. At the bottom of that descent, I then realized how much trouble I was in. This was now the third stage, and my body was saying, “No more.” And my lower back began to seize up. If you know anything about cycling or anything about the lower back, the last thing you want to do is to stand up. But the problem with cycling is the last thing you want to do is to sit down and try to climb anything. And so I was in a great deal of pain. I wanted to stop. But I slowed down, not knowing how I was going to finish. People were passing me. Support cars and vehicles were passing me. It was a difficult day.

Until, of course, we reached the last couple of miles, and my wife and my daughter were still cheering for me. And that helped me. And I was determined to finish the race. But no matter how hard my wife and my daughter rooted for me, no matter how much they wanted me to finish, they were simply spectators, bystanders, watching me. They couldn’t climb on the bike with me to help me. They couldn’t help my lower back in its pain. They simply could watch and stand by in hopes that I would finish, hopefully. The irony is this: for many Christians, that’s precisely how they experience the work of Christ—that Christ, who is determined to finish the work for our salvation, his death on the cross and his being raised to life on the third day—that our experience of that or our entrance into that is not as participants but as spectators.

And so as it goes, for many Christians, they understand the work of the cross on Good Friday and Easter Sunday Morning as being wonderful, life-changing, but they are experiencing it as simply spectators. Yes, they’re in the arena. Yes, they see the excitement. They shout for victory in Christ. And yet they believe, as spectators, that Christ is the one who has finished this, and so therefore our job is to get it together and make the rest of it happen. Jesus has done his work. Now I need to finish my race. And Jesus then is sort of like a spectator for us. He’s hoping that we will finish. “Go, you can do it!” And we’ll dip back and forth. We’ll want to talk to Jesus on the sidelines like that phrase a few years ago: what would Jesus do? We want to go back to him for advice. Maybe we want to really thank him for what he did, like a tip. “Thank you. Now I can go.”

But is that what should be the normative experience for the Christian? How do we participate—or do we participate—in what God was determined to finish for us? That is what is here in this passage—is that while God in Christ was determined to finish our salvation, victory over sin and death in the resurrection, that we were never intended to be far off, merely spectators, but rather participants in it. Two points this morning in which I want you to see this. One you see in your bulletin: one for the other. Secondly: our lives through Him. One for the other, and our lives through Him.

So one for the other. You hear it directly straight-off in this passage when he says, “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.” What does it then mean to say “one for the other”? I’ll give it to you in a simplified sentence, yet it’s extremely complex, and it is this: the offended party (that is, God) who is the one whom we sin against—though we may sin against one another, our sins are first and foremost against God—God as the offended party bears the burden of the offense. God, the offended party, bears the weight of our offense.

You see, this is a very different view or picture of God than which the world often wants to paint God. Oftentimes God is viewed as one who is simply a judge, who perhaps refuses mercy and simply says,

“Get your act together or I will have to come down there and punish you.” Or perhaps he is viewed as one who is far off. Perhaps he ignores sin. Perhaps he is numbed by it. Perhaps he doesn’t even care. The reality is, this text tells us something precisely. And this is echoing something I said on Good Friday night’s service. God is not far off, but rather, he does something about our sin.

And this is what he does—he is, in this verse, declaring that God fulfills a promise from long ago. That at the outset of the sin of Adam and Eve, of which we are their offspring as human beings, we share with them guilt of sin. And yet God’s posture towards Adam and Eve, God’s posture towards you before you even breathed one breath of life—you need to hear this—God’s posture is one of mercy. And that from the beginning, God’s promise was and is, “I have done something about sin.” And that is, he gave himself, and he was determined to do something about sin. And he does it by turning everything that we understand about offender and offended and turns it upside down. Let me give you an illustration from my life.

Some of you know, if you’ve heard my story, I was a wild hare growing up. This year marks my thirtieth year of knowing Christ, and I remember very vividly what it was like not to know Christ. I was very happy—or so I thought. But I lived life by the seat of my pants. Whatever came to my heart, came to my desires, I went after it. And sometimes it made sense, and sometimes it was complete lunacy. One of those moments was when I decided to take a baseball with my good friend—and by the way, I failed at T-ball, so I should never even be holding a baseball. So I decided that we would go to my neighbor’s house, he would go to the front yard, and I would be in the backyard, and I would throw the baseball over the house to see if he could catch it. That didn’t go well. I took the baseball and I threw it, and—you guessed it—it didn’t make it over the house. In fact, it went through the house. It went through a window—the back window of my neighbor’s dining room. It went *crash*, and of course that got their attention. And so therefore they got my parent’s attention.

My father comes out. I’m a little afraid. I’m scared. I apologize to my father, and he realizes what he needs to do. But in that moment, all that my father can do is hear my apology and then go to the neighbor—and all he can do is offer to help pay for the repair of the window. He can’t echo my apologies and apologize for me. Perhaps he can apologize for how he should have been paying attention to the fact that his son can’t throw a baseball and should not be throwing it over his neighbor’s house. There are a number of things that my father can do. But what he can’t do is what is the problem—he is simply a third party. He’s not the one who is offended. He can pay for the window, but what he can’t do is mend the relationship. Only the offended party can do so.

And this is precisely what God does in Christ. Jesus Christ, ladies and gentlemen, is not an independent contractor, a third party, that God calls in to take care of the problem between us and God, the problem that sin causes. Jesus is God, is the second person of the Trinity. And as God, he comes to us as the offended party and bears our offense and brings reconciliation between us and the Father. This is what is so different—that Jesus didn’t simply come in and make an appeal; rather, he came in as God and bore the weight of our sin.

But how is it, then, that we begin to appropriate this? It’s what the Bible calls, and it’s what Christianity calls, faith. Now we needn’t, when we talk about faith, overcomplicate it. Let me illustrate it this way. If I were to take this chair for just a moment—and yes, I’m going to awkwardly walk back here and not hit any instruments—but faith is nothing more complicated than this chair. Because this chair is something that is to uphold my weight, that when I sit in it, what I’m doing is I’m sitting in it so that it will hold my weight. But I’m also doing something else: I’m resting. And when we participate in the Christian faith, by faith, we are doing exactly what I’m doing here. We are participating by saying, “I have faith. I trust what Christ has done on my behalf.”

But something yet even more amazing—I don’t look at the chair and say from far off, “I have faith in that chair. It’s a good chair. It will uphold my weight. And I will enjoy the benefits of being held up in

that chair,” but I won’t actually sit in it. The only way to actually participate in what that chair can do for me is to sit in it and participate in what it’s doing. Yes, I’m sitting here. It’s carrying my weight. But I’m participating in it. You see, here’s the mystery of faith—that when Christ dies on the cross as our satisfaction, when Jesus as God’s son bears the weight and burden of our offense and we trust in that, by faith, that means Christ’s death becomes my death. And if Christ is dying for our sin and sin is therefore put to death, that means my old life, my old way, my old self of living in sin is also put to death. Therefore, I’m not a spectator to what Jesus has done. No, by faith I become a participant in his death. Therefore I can declare Christ’s death is for me, and it is my death.

See, this is precisely what Paul was getting at in the Book of Romans when he said these words in Romans 6:

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. [Romans 6:1-4, NIV 1984]

This is the whole crux and mystery of faith. We are not far off. Jesus is not far off. Rather, he is close. And if we believe in him by faith, the Scriptures declare we do so. As he was raised by the Spirit, so too is the Spirit active and working in us. That means that we carry the Trinity with us. We are united to Christ. And there is both a reality and a beauty to that. That means that when I sin, Christ is not a far off bystander, a spectator to my sin. I carry Christ with me even when I sin, which is why I mourn it. You see, I want to think that I keep my sin and my life far apart from him. He’s over there. But no, we carry Christ with us and in us. And when we sin, he is there.

But here’s the beauty. Because Christ has died and so have I, does that mean I shall go on sinning? Absolutely not! For where sin abounds, grace abounds. Why? Because Christ is in you, the hope of glory. And we need not cower or run from God, but rather, “Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.” So you see, the Christian faith is not a spectator sport; it is a full-on union with the Redeemer. And Christ has died and bourn the offense. Our sin has been paid for in full. It is finished.

But here’s the turn. Were we to stop at Good Friday and why we emphasize resurrection is because if we were to stop at Good Friday, all that we have is simply forgiveness. Without Easter Sunday morning, we will not have changed. We would simply still be who we are: sinners. Yes, we’ve been forgiven, but we haven’t changed. But the reality of the resurrection is that Christ is brought back from death to life—new life. So Paul says, when he says, “We, therefore, are buried with him through baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we, too, may live”—the same life? the old life? No, “the new life.”

Said in another way, the power and beauty of the gospel does not stop with Christ on the cross, his burial—but his resurrection is that sinners would be forgiven, but not just sin on their merry way to figure it out on their own, but rather, we have this double-grace. We have Good Friday, and we have Easter Sunday morning. Because it is the Holy Spirit working through Christ. As Christ was raised from the dead through the Spirit, so we, too, are enabled to live through Christ our lives through him, not in our own strength, but by the animating power of the Holy Spirit.

This is what Peter is talking about. Though the whole issue with Noah and the eight members—another Sunday—but what he talks about, what he really wants to talk about, is his baptism. You heard it in Paul. You see it in Peter. When Peter says this: “Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you.” What does that mean? Does that mean that baptism literally saves someone? No. He’s quick to say: “not as a removal of dirt from the body,” meaning baptism and its waters do not save anyone as if baptism were a

bath in which the dirt gets removed and we're good to go. No, it's what baptism points to: a deeper truth, a more intimate reality. And as one writer described it this way: "As water covers the person baptized, so the old self," the way we used to live in sin and rebellion, "the old self dies with Christ. As the person emerges from the water, so the new self is raised with Christ. And as the Spirit was active in the resurrection of Christ, so the Spirit is active in the our coming to life."

So just as faith and trust in the work of Christ on the cross, and we participate in it, so faith enables us to participate in the new life of Christ. That means we have new wills, new minds, new hearts. Yes, you're still the personality that God has made you. It's not destroyed or removed. But rather, we are given renewed lives. Therefore, our new life, we become the people God always intended, because our personality, our lives, begins to reflect the qualities of Christ. This is what Paul meant when he said, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me, and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." Likewise, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away. Behold, the new has come."

So what does this mean, to live this new life in Christ? It means—using the words of a great pastor and scholar, Martin Luther—he used this metaphor of what it means to have this new life, to participate in this new life with Christ. He used this metaphor—he says union with Christ, faith in him, is like when fire heats an iron, and the iron glows like fire. But though the iron glows, it's not the iron's heat, but the fire's. Or rather, it's the iron's heat because it's the fire's heat. Remove the iron from the fire, and the iron will grow cold. Keep the fire on, and the iron will remain hot. So it is with the person whom Christ indwells. It takes on Christ's qualities, becomes Christ-like. It doesn't start being and living on its own. Rather, the soul lives and acts like Christ because Christ is present in it and lives through it. Take Christ away, and the soul founds under the power of sin. Keep Christ in, and the soul is freely thinking, speaking, and acting as Christ would.

So as we finish, what that means at the street-level is actually extremely practical. That means in our relationships with our children, with our spouses, with our friends, with our bosses, with those who work for us, those who work with us, those that we recreate with, those that we are around—at every level of life, at every possible corner of life, what the Christian is called to participate in is not to ask Jesus from far off to come in and invade. He is already here. And so each day, we seek to be reminded that the Word is the heat that reminds us of the work of the Spirit. And as we give ourselves and submit ourselves to the Word, as we cry out to God in prayer and confession and supplication and thanksgiving, we are putting ourselves in the fire. And the Spirit works in us to keep aflame, as Calvin said, to give us hearts aflame for Christ.

Therefore, we ask the Spirit to tame our tongues, how we speak, how we respond. We go to the Lord in decisions of all kinds and submit ourselves to him, recognizing we don't live autonomously outside of the work of Christ and just ask him to come in. No, rather, every day we ask him, "Lord, go before me. Bless the work of my hands. Lead me in the way that I should go." This is what we ask the Lord to participate in. This is the street-level, asking, "Lord, come and enable me to remain in the fire, the heat, and the work of Christ." This is, I recognize, in some ways, perhaps abstract. But what we are talking about is that Christ, who is our life, came as the one offended and bore our burden. And in faith, we die with him. And in his resurrection, we are raised with him into new life.

I don't know where it is you may be regarding faith in Christ. Perhaps you walk with him. Perhaps you know him, and perhaps you do not. If you do not know Christ, I pray that today would be the first day of the rest of eternity for you to know that God is so determined to pursue you, to draw you to himself, he has born your sin and invites you not into some weird, abstract experience, but into a living, unified relationship with him. And he resides with you. And we seek to walk in this life as those empowered, enlivened, and given new hearts and new minds to walk with him. I invite you to know him today. And if you want to talk with someone about faith at all, I encourage you, invite you, to please come and speak

with me. I would love to talk to you about faith in Christ. But I must, and we must, at the preaching of the gospel, invite you to repent and believe—for Christ has died for you.

May the Lord make us a people who are united to him his victorious over sin and death. And as I said on Friday night, I echo again: as those who have been relentlessly forgiven, may we be a people who increasingly, relentlessly forgive as sinners saved by grace. Let's pray.

Now, Lord, we ask that you would give us your Holy Spirit. I pray, our Father, that you would enable us to live and walk with you in newness of life. May you enable us to trust in you. May you give us this gift of the work of Christ for our salvation, and to have him as life and the power unto life. Lord, we pray these things in the matchless name of Christ. Amen.