

Suffering and Victory

This morning we continue our study of the book of 1 Peter. Today, our passage is a very challenging passage to interpret. In fact, many commentators would agree that 1 Peter 3:18-22 is one of the most difficult passages to interpret in all of the New Testament. Martin Luther, the great reformer, wrote in his commentary: “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.” One of the difficulties in determining the meaning of this passage is the sheer number of perspectives on it. There are roughly 18 theories on this passage, and out of my nine commentaries on this passage, no two views were perfectly alike. But, rather than taking the time to explain each one of these views, I am going to give you my take on the text. As always, make sure to be a Berean, take the things that you hear and line them up with the Scriptures. Examine the Scriptures daily to see if these things are so.

By way of reminder, the theme that runs throughout this book is living in the midst of suffering, specifically, living in the midst of unjust suffering.

1 Peter 2:20-21, For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. 21 For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.

The call to salvation and the call to suffer go hand in hand. It is through unjust suffering that we will experience our great salvation. In the life of a Christian, suffering is not just a detour on the road that leads to everlasting glory, but rather, suffering is the road that leads to everlasting glory. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. Christ is our example and we are called to walk in his steps. The Greek word translated *example* means to write under, or to copy. It is an educational term, and it refers to the faint outlines of letters or patterns, which are then traced over by those who are seeking to duplicate the original image. Think back to when you first learned to write, with painstaking effort and close application, you followed the contour and shapes of the letters of your teacher. In a similar fashion, with the same effort and application, we are to trace and follow the pattern that was set by the LORD Jesus Christ. He is our standard and we are to follow all of his lines, we are to follow in all of his steps. The Greek word for *steps* literally means foot-prints or tracks. The picture that comes to mind is a child that is attempting to walk in the footprints made by his parents, in the snow or the sand. Again, in a similar fashion, we are to follow, with extreme diligence and effort, in the same footprints, and the same path that our LORD Jesus Christ walked.

Amidst suffering, amidst unjust suffering, we are to behave, respond, and conduct ourselves in the same manner of Christ. We are to have the same attitude and outlook as Christ. We are to walk in the same steps in which he walked. Peter knows that living amidst unjust suffering is very difficult, he knows that living amidst unjust suffering is hard, he knows that it can be very disheartening, depressing, and lonesome. So he is writing to encourage his readers that just as the LORD Jesus Christ was victorious in his unjust suffering, so will those who suffer for his sake also be victorious.

This is the main point that Peter is making in our text this morning. No matter the interpretive difficulties, no matter the differing perspectives on this passage, the primary idea of this text is for believers to know that just as the LORD Jesus Christ was victorious in his suffering, so will we, his followers, be victorious in our suffering. Beloved, there is triumph, there is victory, there is great advantage in the midst of suffering and

trials. And nowhere is this truth illustrated more clearly as it is illustrated in the life, death, and resurrection of the LORD Jesus Christ. So Peter desires that we learn not only to have a right perspective and attitude in suffering, but he also wants us to realize that there is purpose in our suffering, and that we should be eagerly anticipating our future victory. It is through our suffering that we will triumph. So do not lose heart, do not be discouraged, and do not despair. The unjust suffering that you are experiencing is the pathway to your future glory.

As we move forward in this text, you must remember this primary thought – the Lord Jesus Christ suffered, but the Lord Jesus Christ was also victorious. For the Christian, suffering is not the last word. We will share the same destiny as our Lord and Savior. Just as he suffered, we will suffer, and just as he was victorious, we will be victorious, for his suffering has forever secured our victory.

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, 19 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.

This morning, we're going to look at four things:

1. A victorious atonement (v18)
2. A gospel announcement (vv19-20)
3. A sincere appeal (v21)
4. A triumphant ascension (v22)

Point #1, A Victorious Atonement (v18)

1 Peter 3:18, 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,

The conjunctions *for* and *also* connect this passage (3:18-22) with the previous passage (vv15-17), where Peter prepares his readers for persecution and hostility. In the midst of physical harm, in the midst of hostility, you will be safe, you will be secure, and you will be protected under the care and blessing of the LORD God Almighty. In fact, if you do suffer for the sake of righteousness, then you will be blessed. And this should be our ongoing perspective on suffering, that it is a great and tremendous blessing. Thus you must have no fear of those who afflict you, nor are you to be troubled by them. But rather, Christ the Lord must be honored as holy in your hearts. Christ the Lord must be set apart and given the highest, greatest, and most supreme position in our lives. The LORD Jesus Christ must reign in our hearts.

Beginning in v18, Peter continues to give reassurance to Christians who must endure unjust suffering and persecution. He does this by once again redirecting our attention back to the LORD Jesus Christ. He points us back to our example, back to our model, back to the outline, or the pattern that we are commanded to closely follow. The attitude and actions of LORD Jesus Christ were the perfect example of how to endure unjust suffering. For it was through his suffering, and through his death, that the redemptive purposes of the LORD God were fulfilled.

Beloved, our willingness to suffer for the sake of Christ must be rooted in the cross. Our willingness to suffer for the sake of Christ must be rooted in his willingness to suffer and die in our place. The LORD Jesus

Christ made the ultimate sacrifice, death (even death on a cross), so that you and I would be brought near to God and that we would be able to share in his triumph and glory.

1 Peter 3:18, For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteousness for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.

In his life, Jesus Christ accomplished what none of us could ever accomplish. He perfectly obeyed the law of God, he perfectly obeyed the will of God, he surrendered his will, to the will of the Father. Jesus Christ lived a perfect, just, and righteous life. In his death, Jesus Christ died as a divinely appointed substitute. His death provided atonement between the LORD God and sinners, thus establishing peace. As a result of sin, our relationship with the LORD God was estranged. Our relationship with the LORD God had been severed, our communion with him was severed. As a result of sin, all men were justly condemned to die, having no hope and being without God in the world.

But God, because of his great love for sinners, sent his son, Jesus Christ, into the world, so that sinners might be saved, so that sinners might be reconciled to him, our relationship with him being fully restored. Having been justified by faith, Romans 5:1-2, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Our peace with God is made possible only by the life, death, and resurrection of the LORD Jesus Christ. Our peace with God, is made possible only by what the LORD Jesus Christ accomplished on our behalf. Christ suffered once for sins, the righteousness for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God. Beloved, we are free because another man died in our place. The LORD Jesus Christ endured the punishment of sin, he endured the penalty of sin, he satisfied the demands of the law, and the demands of a thrice holy and just God. Jesus Christ suffered and died once for sins.

What does it mean that *he suffered once for sins*? The Greek phrase translated *once for sins* is *hapax*, which means of perpetual validity, or not requiring repetition. In short, the sacrifice of Christ was sufficient, therefore, his sacrifice was final—it is finished. In the Old Testament, the sacrificial system required multitude upon multitude of animal sacrifices, to be slaughtered, to atone for the sins of the people. During the annual Passover celebration, it is estimated that there were as many as a quarter of a million sheep that would be sacrificed, but none of these sacrifices were able to fully remove the guilt, the stain, and the permanence of sin. In the New Testament the LORD Jesus Christ is shown to be the perfect sacrifice. He was the perfect Lamb of God who took away the sins of the world. He was without spot, he was without stain, and he was without blemish. And his sacrifice, once for all, removed the guilt, removed the stain, and has removed the permanence of sin—forever.

Hebrews 10:10-14, And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. 11 And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. 12 But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, 13 waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. 14 For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

By a single offering, the LORD Jesus Christ took away sin. By a single sacrifice, the LORD Jesus Christ atoned for the sins of his people, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us to God. Beloved, it was through the greatest injustice, it was through the harshest persecution, it was through the most intense physical and emotional affliction that the atonement of the LORD Jesus Christ achieved for us victory—victory over sin, victory over death, victory over the Adversary, victory over the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places, and the result of his victory is our reconciliation, our peace with the LORD God.

Ephesians 2:13-22, But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the

blood of Christ. 14 For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility 15 by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, 16 and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. 17 And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. 18 For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. 19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. 22 In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

This passage speaks of such tremendous blessings, blessings which are all found in Christ Jesus. In Christ, he has secured for us peace, he has reconciled us to the Father. In Christ, we have access to God, citizenship in the kingdom of God, and adoption into the household of God, where we are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. The phrase, no hope, no longer describes us. The phrase without God, no longer describes us. What does describe us? The phrase “in Christ.” Our identity is found in Christ Jesus, and we are to live our lives in the reality of this truth. All of the blessings of God are found in Christ Jesus, because of, v18, a victorious atonement, Christ suffered once for sins, the righteousness for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.

Point #2, A Gospel Announcement (v19-20)

1 Peter 3:18-20, 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, 19 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.

On the cross the LORD Jesus Christ was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit. What does this mean? It means that on the cross Jesus Christ died, not figuratively, but literally. Jesus Christ's death on the cross was an actual death. On the cross, his physical life ceased, and he was buried in a tomb. But after he was put to death, he was made alive in the spirit. He was made alive in the spiritual realm. In the realm of the Holy Spirit's activity, Jesus Christ was raised from the dead.

Christ was made alive in the spiritual realm (v18) and he also did something else in the spiritual realm (v19-20). And this is the tricky portion of the passage. The meaning of these verses are very much disputed.

1 Peter 3:19-20, 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.

There are many difficult questions that arise from these verses.

1. Who are the spirits in prison? Is this referring to unbelievers, to believers, or to fallen angels?
2. What did Christ preach? Was it a second chance of redemption? Was it the completion of his redemptive work? Or was it his final condemnation?
3. When did he preach? Was it in the days of Noah? Was it between his death and resurrection? Or was it after his resurrection?

As I mentioned before, various answers have been given to these questions. There are five main views that have been the most commonly held, regarding the interpretation of this passage. Some are better than others,

but each one has its strengths and each one has its weaknesses. I am going to share with you the view that I think explains it the best.

In the days of Noah, when the ark was being prepared, the Pre-incarnate Christ, in spirit, was preaching repentance and righteousness, through Noah, to the unbelievers who were on the earth at that time, but are now spirits in prison, that is, people in hell.

Christ made proclamation to the spirits in prison. The reference to the spirits in prison are those who formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared. The reason I believe this is referring to human spirits, rather than angelic spirits, is that nowhere in the Scriptures are angels ever said to have disobeyed during the building of the ark. In Genesis 6, what is clearly emphasized is that human sin is what provoked the LORD God to flood the earth in judgment, not angelic sin.

Genesis 6:5-6, The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. 6 And the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.

In 1 Peter 3:20, there is also the mention of God's patience in the days of Noah, which implies human disobedience. The LORD God's patience waited for mankind to repent before bringing upon them the judgment of the flood. There is nowhere in the Scriptures that suggests that fallen angels have a chance to repent, rather, repentance is only given to sinful man.

What was the message proclaimed? In the face of disobedience and rebellion, while the patience of God was waiting, the only appropriate message to proclaim is one of repentance and righteousness, which is precisely what the Pre-incarnate Christ preached through Noah.

2 Peter 2:5, if he did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven others, when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly;

Through Noah, a herald of righteousness, the Pre-Incarnate Christ exhorted the disobedient unbelievers to repent and to obey the LORD God; he condemned sin and he commended righteousness.

Why do you think Peter uses such an obscure reference to get his point across? Why mention this somewhat confusing passage in the midst of encouraging believers to stand fast under unjust suffering? Peter uses this example because there was a tremendous parallel between Noah and his contemporaries, and the readers of his epistle and their contemporaries. The commentator Wayne Grudem makes six comparisons between Noah and the readers of Peter's epistle.

1. Noah and his family were a minority surrounded by hostile unbelievers. So were the readers of Peter's epistle.
2. Noah was righteous in the midst of a wicked world. Peter frequently exhorted his readers to be righteous in the midst of a wicked world.
3. Noah witnessed boldly to those around him. Peter encourages his readers to be good witnesses, and to be willing to suffer, if need be, to bring others to God (just as Christ was willing to suffer and die that he might bring us to God).
4. Noah realized that judgment was soon to come upon the world. Peter reminds his readers that God's judgment is certainly coming, and that they will have to give account to him.
5. At the time of Noah, God was patiently awaiting the repentance of unbelievers, before he brought judgment. So it is in the situation of Peter's readers, God is patiently awaiting repentance of unbelievers before bringing judgment upon the world.
6. Noah was finally saved, with a few others. Peter thus encourages his readers that though perhaps few,

they too will finally be saved, for Christ has triumphed and all things are subject to him.

These verses (vv18-20) while difficult to understand, should function today as an encouragement to us to be bold in our witness, just as Noah was bold in his witness. Christians must be confident that, though we may be few, the LORD God will certainly save us, just as he did Noah and his family. These verses remind us that just as certainly as the flood eventually came, so final judgment will certainly come to our world as well, and Christ will ultimately triumph over all the evil in this world.

1 Peter 3:20, 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.

Noah and his family escaped through water. Noah and his family entered the ark on the same day as the flood. All of them were delivered from the wrath of God, they were delivered from the waters of the flood by the ark. The flood came and drowned the entire world except for these eight people. And Peter sees their salvation as a parallel to our salvation.

Principle #3, A Sincere Appeal (v21)

1 Peter 3:21, 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,

The Greek phrase translated "which corresponds to" is *antitupon*, meaning copy, or counterpart, or a figure pointing to. This phrase is where we get the theological term antitype, which describes an earthly expression of a heavenly reality. Peter is teaching that those who believed in God, and who were preserved in the ark, corresponds to the salvation of those who believe in Christ, and are preserved through the cross. As Noah fled into the ark, we flee to Christ, and in him we escape judgment.

At first glance, it may seem that Peter is teaching baptismal regeneration, that immersion in water saves you from the judgment of God, but we know this is not the case. Baptism will not save you, baptism cannot save you. In fact, anticipating that his readers may take it this way, he immediately says in v21, "not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience." The outward act of baptism, immersion into water, cannot cleanse your inner man, it cannot cleanse or purify your heart. Rather, baptism is the outward manifestation of our inner reality. Baptism is the symbolic expression of what has already happened in our hearts, namely our appeal to God, our appeal to God for a clean conscience. In other words, baptism now saves you, not the outward physical ceremony of baptism, but the inward spiritual reality which baptism by immersion represents.

Baptism is an appeal to God for a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Baptism saves for this reason alone, it is an expression of our faith. Sinful men do not have a good conscience. Sinful men do not have a clear conscience. Remember the role that the conscience plays, it either affirms right behavior or it condemns sinful behavior. God has given us a conscience to act as a source of conviction or a source of affirmation. The conscience either denounces us or it approves us. When the LORD God gives us a clear conscience, that person has the assurance that every sin has been forgiven and that he or she stands in a right relationship with him. To be baptized is to make this appeal to God. "Please, God, as I enter the waters of baptism, which will cleanse my body outwardly, I am asking you to cleanse and purify my heart inwardly, forgive me all of my sins, and make me right before you."

And yet, not even this appeal to God is the basis of our salvation. Our salvation has been earned for us by the LORD Jesus Christ, and all that baptism represents comes to us, not on the merits of any response from us, but through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Water baptism does not save you. Immersion into Christ is what saves you. Immersion into his death, burial, and resurrection.

Romans 6:3-5, Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. 5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

It is not the external ritual, it is not the external rite, but a heart that longs to be delivered from the burden and plague of sin. And it is this appeal to God that leads you through the judgment of God, through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Allan Stibbs remarked, "The ark passing safely through the flood provides a figure of God's method of saving men out of inevitable judgment. First, God delayed the day of judgment long enough for an ark to be prepared. Then the souls that went into the ark did not avoid the judgment, rather in the ark they were saved through the very water which drowned others and because of it, they thus passed out of the old world into a new world. When they emerged from the ark, they literally found that old things had passed away and all things had become new. The figure is fulfilled in Christ. He was prepared of God to come in the fullness of time. The judgment due to sin and sinners was meanwhile delayed. Then the judgment fell on Him as the flood waters upon the ark. And when sinners take refuge in Him, they do not avoid the judgment due to sin, they are saved through its falling on Christ and because of it, instead of meeting their own doom they are brought safe in Him to God."

Beloved, you who have appealed to the LORD God for a good conscience have been forever rescued from the wrath of God, because Jesus Christ suffered and died, the righteous for the unrighteous. The just judgment and wrath of God fell upon him and he took it all, for us, to bring us to God. Beloved, no matter what fiery trials may come, no matter how agonizing your life may become, you are in Christ; you are identified with Christ; you are united to Christ; you are victorious in Christ; you are in the ark of Christ, and nothing can change that.

To further show us the completeness of our victory over suffering; to show us the completeness of our victory in Christ, Peter reminds his readers that after Christ suffered and died he ascended to God the Father.

Principle #4, A Triumphant Ascension (v22)

1 Peter 3:22, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

After describing all of the suffering that the LORD Jesus Christ endured, Peter concludes this passage of Scripture in one glorious final note of victory and triumph, his ascension to the right hand of God. Throughout the Scriptures, the right hand of God is the place of preeminence. It is the place of authority and power, and this is where Jesus went when he had accomplished his work on the cross.

Philippians 2:9-11, Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Every knee will bow, in heaven, on earth, and under the earth; all angels, all authorities, and all powers have been subject to him. The Greek word translated subject is *hypotasso* (who,pa,toss-o) literally meaning to arrange under, or to place under in an orderly fashion. The term was often used by the military to describe troops falling into rank and ordering themselves into proper battle formation, attentive and subordinate to the will of the commanding officer. The LORD Jesus Christ is the highest and the greatest, he outranks, he excels,

and he supersedes all other spiritual entities, Jesus Christ is LORD.

Beloved, I hope you are encouraged by this passage of Scripture. I hope it encourages you to live your life in light of our suffering and victorious Savior.

1. The LORD Jesus Christ accomplished our redemption, his atonement was victorious.
2. The Pre-incarnate Christ, through Noah, proclaimed repentance and righteousness to a hostile and unbelieving world. As his witnesses, we too must be willing to suffer, if need be, to bring others to God.
3. Through the life, death, burial, and resurrection of the LORD Jesus Christ, we may appeal to God for a clean conscience, and the LORD God will grant our sincere appeal.
4. After his resurrection, the LORD Jesus Christ triumphantly ascended, and reigns at the right hand of God the Father.

This morning, we covered a lot of material in a short amount of time. If I lost you with some of the details, remember the big idea, Peter was writing to encourage his readers that just as the LORD Jesus Christ suffered but was victorious, Christians will too suffer, but we will also share in his victory, for we are in Christ Jesus.