

## **Victory in Suffering — 1 Peter 3:13-22**

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### **Preparing to Suffer**

I think it was in seminary when I was told that a pastor's job is significantly to prepare his people to suffer. Which if you think about it, makes perfect sense. Suffering is universal and a certainty at some point in this fallen world. Suffering is usually the context in which one's faith in Christ is either wonderfully strengthened like gold in the refiner's fire or consumed, revealing that faith was a façade, made of nothing but straw.

Now as we resume our series in 1 Peter, our passage this morning is long and difficult. From Martin Luther to D.A. Carson, there is a general consensus that the latter half of our passage, v.18-22, is the most difficult to understand in the whole New Testament. So at the onset, I want you to know what Peter is trying to do here. He is endeavoring to be a faithful pastor, preparing his people to suffer. Peter's main point—the thing you should walk out of here this morning remembering about this passage—is that you, Christian, must endure through suffering because Jesus saved you and is the triumphant king. When suffering comes—and Peter particularly has in mind suffering resulting from you *being* a Christian—when suffering comes, remember that Jesus saved you and is the triumphant king.

### **Faith in Future Grace (v.13-14b)**

Now Peter introduced this topic of suffering most recently in v.9 when he wrote, “Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling.” Instead, we are to bless and do good. So the rhetorical question of v.13, “If you are zealous for what is good”—for doing good—“who is there to harm you?” It's possible that Peter means if you keep your head down, obey the law, and stay out of trouble, you will generally be left alone. But Tom Schreiner suggests that Peter rather means this

question to have eschatological implications.<sup>1</sup> Given where Peter goes through the end of chapter 4, with a view to Christ's return and the final Day of Judgment, it seems that what he is asking here is, "Who will harm you *on the Last Day* if you *endure* in zeal for what is good?" If you persevere in faithfulness, what can be done to you, Christian? It's like what Paul says in Romans 8:31, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" The answer to both apostles is no one and nothing!

If you are zealous for what is good—if you endure in pursuing holiness—then you have nothing to fear at the return of Christ. That's what he means by the "good." If you keep your tongue from evil and your lips from deceit, if you turn away from evil and seek peace, then God will look on you as the righteous and he will hear your prayers. That's what Peter says in v.10-12. Christian, if you do not give in to worldliness, sinful allurements, and the entanglements of your former way of life, none will stand to bring an accusation against you on the day of reckoning because you will have endured in your faith in Christ.

However, we live here and now. We live in a world hostile to the gospel and in rebellion against Christ. So if you suffer for the sake of the Name, know that you will be blessed. This is what Jesus taught, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:10). So your faith in the future grace of God's blessing ought to have a sanctifying influence on you now. That's how Piper has explained this biblical dynamic. Knowing that you *will* be blessed by God *then*, pursue holiness and righteousness and the good *now*.

### **Prepared to Suffer** (v.14c-16)

Having such a perspective and outlook on your suffering, you will be prepared to suffer well. And Peter continues by further equipping us. Because we will be blessed, we therefore

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Schreiner, *1,2 Peter, Jude*, NAC vol.37 (B&H: Nashville, 2003), p.170.

ought not regard our persecutors as supreme but Christ. They can only kill you. Don't fear them or their threats. Don't be troubled by the affliction that may come upon you. *Instead*, revere the Lord Jesus as supreme. Set him apart in your heart as *the* Holy One. Be confident that Jesus *is* Lord, that he is God himself. That's one way you will be equipped to face your persecutors. And what Peter is doing here is actually quoting Isaiah 8:12-13, "Do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. But the LORD of hosts, him you shall honor as holy." As Isaiah called Judah to not fear the godless affliction of Israel and Syria but to trust in the sovereign YHWH, so Peter calls on Christians to not fear the godless affliction in our day but to trust in the sovereign Lord Jesus.

Now before we get too far in here, I want to pause to say that I assume that nearly all of us have never experienced suffering *for being a Christian*. Most of us don't even have the threat of persecution of any variety to be concerned about. So what are we to do with this passage? First, I would say that the principles Peter speaks of here apply to suffering in general and not just persecution. When you face suffering of any kind, regard Jesus as Lord over that experience; it is not beyond his control. Recall the promise of the gospel, that a day is coming when Jesus will wipe away every tear and death will be no more.

I would also say we need to be ready, for there very well may be a not-too-distant day when *real* persecution comes right here. That isn't an assessment on our government or the trajectory of our society. Rather, that need to be prepared is derived from the thrust of the biblical witness and Church history. The gospel we proclaim is a stumbling block and offense. So we need to learn to be faithful in the little things so we are faithful in the big things—faithful when we face the scoff from a coworker so we are more ready to face outright affliction.

So Peter continues in v.15-16 saying we need to be winsomely prepared. We need to be prepared to give reason for why we hope in Christ. This is a favorite verse for calling for reasoned apologetics—there is a place for that, but what Peter is after is a much lower standard.

If a neighbor asks you why you seem to be different than others in the sub, you need to be able to explain why you believe in Jesus. You don't need to be prepared for a nationally televised debate, but you need to be able to articulate the gospel and why you believe it. And this you need to be able to do "with gentleness and respect." Even if you are reviled because of the hope you treasure, you need to respond with a defense that is consistent with that gospel hope. For it is the *gospel* that is a stumbling block and offense, *not* our presentation of it.

And this winsome defense serves your ultimate vindication. You don't seek to win the argument; you entrust yourself to the Lord Jesus knowing that on that Day he will put to shame those who slander you. Since none will harm you on that Day, we don't need to be caustic, prideful, or smug in our gospel witness. Your identity is *not* in what people think of you today but in the Lord Jesus with whom you are profoundly united.

### **Grounded in Good** (v.17)

So, yes, "it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil." In this summary statement of the first half of the passage, Peter is saying we ought to pursue lives of holiness in the midst of an adversarial, evil world. And if God wills that we suffer for righteousness' sake, then so be it. Come what may. We will be faithful to the hope to which we have been called. After all, Peter already explained that suffering for doing evil is nothing special. That's what he told servants in 2:19-20—it is a gracious thing to endure suffering for doing good but is of no credit if you sin and suffer for it. With confidence in Christ and resolve to be holy as he who called us is holy (cf. 1:15), we will be ready to endure through suffering for the sake of the Name.

### **Grounded in Christ** (v.18-19)

And we can do so *not* because of our preparations, *not* because of our own volition, *not* because of prior experience with suffering, but *because* "Christ also suffered once for sins, the

righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.” Christian, you have all that you need to face any affliction in this life because your Savior died that you might be brought near to God himself. You can endure through suffering because Christ endured through the same—but far worse—kind of unjust suffering. Jesus suffered for doing perfect, not just doing good, to bring you to God.

As Peter continues by explaining the means of this redemption, we start wading in to the difficulty of this passage. I think we should understand v.18 to say that Jesus has brought us near to God by being put to death—true God of true God was executed on a Roman cross. Yet he did not remain dead but has been made alive in the power of the Holy Spirit. Yes, our crucified Messiah is risen! The one who took on flesh at Christmas died on Good Friday and rose again on Easter Sunday. However, he was not merely risen in his human spirit, as some contend, but body and soul rose from the tomb so that the curse of sin be crushed, that death be defeated. And it was in the resurrection power of God the Spirit that Jesus “went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison.”

Hopefully the response to this statement in v.19 is as clear to you as it is to me ... “Huh? Jesus did what?” There are three main ways this verse has been understood. I’ll overview them, but we won’t go into the merits and hindrances of each, rather we’ll focus on how I think we should understand it. The first view is that Peter is teaching that between Jesus’ death and resurrection he descended into Hell to proclaim the gospel and offer salvation to those people who died in the Flood. I think this view should be soundly rejected. The second view is that through the work of the Spirit, Jesus proclaimed God’s judgment and call to repentance to that wicked generation imprisoned in their sin. This was done through the prophetic work of Noah. This view finds support in what Peter says about the ministry of Old Testament prophets in 1:10-12. This view was held by Augustine and is plausible.

However, I think the best way to understand v.19 is the third view, that it culminates the progression of Christ's redemptive work from v.18, in that he was crucified, he was resurrected, and he ascended on high. Jesus went to the Father's right hand in glory. In this way, v.19 is saying the same thing as v.22: Jesus now reigns in Heaven in perfect authority over all. Where in v.19 the ESV says "he went," that is the exact same verb as in v.22 where the ESV says that Jesus "has gone." Furthermore, the plural word "spirits" almost *always* refers to supernatural beings in the New Testament.<sup>2</sup> And imprisoned supernatural beings is not a unique idea—Peter writes in 2 Peter 2:4, "God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment." He follows that verse with talk about Noah and the flood, just like in our context. Jude 6 and Revelation 20:7 also speak of imprisoned supernatural beings.

But what did Jesus proclaim in his ascension to glory to these imprisoned spirits, the evil supernatural beings? Victory. Having crushed the curse and defeated death, Jesus declared his triumph by resuming his place at the Father's right hand. This serves Peter's purpose for us as we prepare to suffer for Christ's sake. We do not fear man and his threats, and we do not fear the unseen evil powers at work in this world. Jesus Christ alone is demonstrably and perfectly sovereign over them all. Make no mistake about it.

This relates to the disobedience of these spirits in Noah's day in that Peter may especially have in mind the "sons of God" in Genesis 6:1-4. The heinous sin of these beings, as they bore children by the "daughters of man," introduces the Flood narrative and highlights the wickedness that was so pervasive in that day. Jesus is victorious even over such a brazen display of evil.

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<sup>2</sup> See Schreiner, 187 and Karen Jobes, *1 Peter*, BECNT (Baker: Grand Rapids, 2005), p.250.

### **Noah's Baptism (v.20-21)**

To recap, Peter is calling us to endure through suffering because Jesus also suffered unjustly in order to save us, by being crucified, resurrected, and victoriously ascended. That victory extends over all evil, even the rampant display of evil by spiritual beings in Noah's day. So having touched on the Flood narrative, Peter continues by illustrating the deliverance, the salvation, that Jesus has accomplished through the example of Noah and the ark. So we read that "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."

We know that Peter's intention is to use Noah as an illustration because in v.21 we are told that Noah, the ark, and the Flood are a "type" of baptism, which is the "antitype." That is the word that Peter uses, "antitype," and is translated as "corresponds" in the ESV. Peter is saying that Noah, the ark, and the Flood foreshadowed some greater event in redemptive history, namely salvation in Christ. Just as a faithful remnant of those seeking godliness were delivered from an evil world, so also in Christ will a faithful remnant of those seeking godliness be delivered from an evil world. Do you see the parallel? Evil will *not* triumph, no matter how bleak the outlook is. No matter how rampant and unrestrained sin was in Noah's day, and no matter how rampant or unrestrained sin is now or will ever become, God will be faithful and evil will not triumph. For if God was faithful to deliver them, we can know that God will likewise deliver all *in Christ*.

Baptism is the antitype of God's deliverance of Noah and company, for it is in baptism that we see the display of God's deliverance from sin. Baptism is such a clear display of what Jesus has done to accomplish eternal salvation that Peter says baptism "now saves you." However, Peter is so quick to modify that statement to make sure we understand him correctly. Baptism does *not* do the cleansing work of salvation. Peter is *not* promoting a works-based

salvation. He is *not* saying all you have to do is get dunked and you're saved. That's why he jumps to clarify that baptism does *not* remove dirt from the body—it doesn't purify. Rather, baptism is “an appeal to God for a good conscience.” Other translations more helpfully read baptism is “a pledge to God.” Baptism is the act of faith-filled obedience saying you identify with the person and work of Jesus. In being baptized, you declare that you are going to do good and pursue righteousness. That's why those being baptized are asked, “Do you forsake Satan and all his works and all his ways? Do you intend with God's help to obey Jesus' teaching and follow him as your Lord?” In baptism, you are pledging to God that you will be zealous for what is good. You cannot be saved if you do not endure in pursuing holiness.

Furthermore, we should observe another key parallel between the type and antitype. For Noah and family, they were delivered from an evil world by means of the Flood, that is “through water.” We may want to see that Peter is saying that *baptism* is the parallel means of deliverance, but it isn't. If you read v.21 without the parenthetical insertions, the parallel is clearer, “Baptism now saves you *through the resurrection* of Jesus Christ.” Noah was brought safely *through water*, by means of the Flood, and Christians are brought safely *through Christ's resurrection*, by means of the risen Savior. Schreiner again helpfully explains, “Just as Noah was delivered through the stormy waters of the flood, believers have been saved through the stormy waters of baptism by virtue of Christ's triumph over death.”<sup>3</sup>

### **The Victorious Christ Reigns Supreme (v.22)**

It is with that very triumph that Peter concludes this paragraph. This resurrected Jesus who safely delivers his own from an evil world is the very one who has ascended in victory over all. In the midst of the persecution you face, in the midst of the suffering you endure, in the midst of the evil you experience, rest assured that right now Jesus is in Heaven seated at the Father's

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<sup>3</sup> Schreiner, 194.



right hand. He sits on his rightful throne having all dominion and supremacy. There is no angel, there is no authority, there is no power who can come against the exalted Christ. And that means for you, Christian, none can ultimately come against *you*. All have already been subjected to him and can only do as much as he sovereignly ordains.

Here at the turn of another year, you may be grateful that this one is finally over. You look ahead to better things for 2016. May this passage encourage you, that you would know that all that has come to pass in 2015 happened under the authority of the exalted Christ. The Lord Jesus has been sustaining you, equipping you to be zealous for what is good, to continue your pursuit of holiness. Or maybe you are peering ahead into 2016 and things look bleak. It looks like it is going to be hard year. Maybe your job is in a tenuous position or a relationship is on the rocks. Maybe there are a lot of sleepless nights in store. Maybe the persecution Peter is preparing us for will come *this* year. Whatever the year may bring, know that “Christ suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring [you] to God.” Know that Jesus reigns supreme over all that may happen. It is necessary for you to endure through suffering because Jesus saved you and is the triumphant king.

So if the Lord tarries, at the end of 2016, may you be singing, “All glory be to Christ our king! All glory be to Christ! His rule and reign we’ll ever sing, all glory be to Christ!”