

4-28-24

A Christian's Call to Suffer 1 Peter 3: 18 - 22

"For Christ died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water. And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him."

To catch on to what this paragraph is all about we need to see how it relates to what goes before and what comes after.

Just before, in verse 17, Peter calls Christians to suffer if that is God's will for them: *"It is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong."*

Sometimes it's God's will that we suffer for doing what is right. This is not an easy thing to hear. We need help with this.

We need understanding and we need encouragement and hope, if God is going to will that we suffer for doing what is right.

So, in verse 18 Peter begins this paragraph by saying, *"For Christ also died [suffered] for sins once for all . . ."*

The word "for" shows us that Peter is beginning to explain why it is sometimes God's will for us to suffer for doing what is right.

So the paragraph begins as an explanation or a reason for the call to suffer as a Christian for doing what is right.

Then look at the connection between the paragraph and what follows in 4:1. The next unit begins, "*Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same purpose*"

That is, the purpose to suffer for doing what is right, like Christ did.

So just before the text (in 3:17) and just after the text (in 4:1) the point is ...

Get ready to suffer for doing what is right, if that should be God's will. Arm yourselves with that purpose.

Between these two calls to suffer comes our text, verses 18–22. So the main point of these verses is to help us get ready to suffer with Jesus for doing what is right, not for doing what is wrong. For all the puzzling things in these verses we must not forget this main point: to help us arm ourselves with the faith to suffer for the sake of Christ and his kingdom.

If this sounds irrelevant to you, it may be because you, like most Americans, are insulated from the bigger world outside our own little country (about 5% of total) and outside our own little American era (about 5% of the last 6,000 years).

For most of the world and for most of history being a Christian has not been safe. Stephen Neil says in his *History of Christian Missions* (p. 43) that in the first three centuries, when the Church was spreading like wildfire, "*Every Christian knew that sooner or later he might have to testify to his faith at the cost of his life.*"

Just think of it!

Imagine doing evangelism in a context where you could not make any promises to people that things would go better for them on earth, but that if they believed what you offered, they would be risking their lives.

Does that say anything to us about our evangelistic message and methods?

Normal in the context of this letter, and in most of the places of the world most of the time, including today is that being a Christian has its very real risks.

But we have invented names for places where it's dangerous to be a Christian. We call them "closed" countries. Which is odd indeed.

We have taken our false assumption that safety is the norm and used that false assumption to define where the mission of the church can advance.

Peter and Paul would have found this whole idea incomprehensible.

Today, it is normal in most places to suffer for being Christians.

To be safe and respected is the exception, not the rule.

Just one example. Evangelical missionaries entered Cambodia in the 1920s. By the time they were expelled in 1965 there were about 600 believers. Between 1965 and 1975 during the civil war the Christian population soared to an estimated 90,000. It was an amazing work of God. But when tyrannical dictators took control and Pol Pot unleashed his fury on the nation, most of these Christians died or fled the country.

This story can be retold hundreds of times over and over around the world and along the centuries.

It is normal, not abnormal for Christians to be hated.

Jesus said the most sweeping thing in Matthew 24:9, *"You will be hated by all nations on account of my name."*

There is a warning here for us in America. Many Christians in America act as if the liberal, humanistic, secular, relativistic cultural elites have taken our Christian world from us. They haven't because we've never had it. Didn't Jesus say, *"My kingdom is not of this world"*?

I think the time is right for a heavy dose of the teaching of 1 Peter—as in 4:12. *"Do not be surprised when the fiery ordeal comes upon you as though something strange were happening to you."*

Peter is laboring in this letter to say that we are aliens and exiles here and that it is NOT surprising, and not abnormal when the cultural powers that be revile Christianity. *"If they have called the head of the house Beelzebul, how much more the members of his house"* (Matthew 10:25).

So, in this text today—and in the whole letter—Peter is laboring to help us be ready to suffer - if God should will it. This is why verses 18-22 were written.

Let's look at five ways that Peter strengthens us for this real possibility:

First, he insists that we not forget that Christ, our great King and Savior suffered.

Verses 17–18: *"It is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong. FOR Christ also suffered."*

Throughout the New Testament the mindset of Christianity is: our Lord suffered, we will follow him in suffering.

You have Paul saying, "*O that I might know him and the fellowship of his sufferings and be conformed to his death*" (Philippians 3:11).

You have Hebrews saying, "*He suffered outside the gate. Hence let us go with him outside the camp bearing his reproach*" (13:12–13).

You have Jesus saying, "*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me*" (Mark 8:34).

I bear the cross; you will bear the cross.

The first great encouragement to prepare ourselves for suffering for doing what is right is that this is what happened to Jesus the greatest, most loving, caring, truthful, holy man that ever lived.

2: Peter strengthens us to suffer by telling us that Christ has triumphed over our greatest enemy and brought us safe to God.

Someone might ask, "Why would anyone become a Christian if what you could offer them was that things in this world would probably go worse for them and that their lives would be at risk?"

The answer is that the greatest human needs are not to live long on the earth and be comfortable.

The biggest human needs are how to have our sins forgiven and overcome our separation from God and live forever with happiness in his presence instead of living forever in misery in hell.

This is ten thousand times more important than living long on the earth and being comfortable for a zillionth percentage of your existence.

This is what the death of Jesus accomplishes. Verse 18: *"For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God."*

Notice four things.

1. **Christ died "for sins."** This is what separates me from God. This is my biggest need. Sins are my biggest enemy—not Satan. *Isaiah 59:2*, *"Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God."*

This is vastly more terrifying than suffering for righteousness' sake—suffering the wrath of God because my sins have not been forgiven. But Jesus died "for sins." This is the greatest thing in the world. I do not have to die in my sins. There is forgiveness. This is why people would believe on Jesus even if it cost them their lives.

2. **Christ died "the just for the unjust."**

His death was substitutionary. He took my place. He stood under the wrath and penalty that I deserved and bore it for me. His death was utterly innocent. It was all for others' sins, and not his own.

3. **Christ died "once for all"**—that is, his death was final and all-sufficient to accomplish the forgiveness of all who believe on him. He does not have to ever offer another sacrifice. It was finished. It was all that was necessary to take away the guilt of my sins. The debt is paid in full.

4. **All of this brings me to God.** *"Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that he might bring us to God."*

This is the great comfort of martyrs and suffering Christians: Our worst enemy—sin—has been defeated.

And Jesus has made sure that we will be at home safe with God. He has brought us to God. The separation has been removed. God is near us, and he is for us. Our lives are hidden in him.

How does this help us to suffer?

Because one of the terrible temptations of the devil in suffering is to make us think that God has forsaken us.

What he is saying here is: Suffering is no sign that God has forsaken us and turned against us!

Christ has carried our sin, absorbed the wrath of God, and brought us safe to God.

3: The third way that Peter strengthens us for suffering is with the situation in Noah's day.

After referring to Jesus being made alive in the spirit (v. 18), verses 19–20 say,

“In which [i.e., in the spirit] also He [Jesus] went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, 20) who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water.”

There is a lot of controversy over what this refers to, but there need not be. I think it refers to the time when people in Noah's day were disobedient, mocking him as a righteous man obeying God (like the situation in the lives of Peter's readers), and that Jesus, in the spirit, was sent by God in those days to preach to those people through Noah.

Just like in 1:11 the Spirit of Jesus was in the Old Testament prophets predicting his coming, so the Spirit of Jesus was in Noah preaching to the disobedient people of Noah's day.

They are NOW in prison—that is, in a place of torment awaiting the final judgment (Luke 16:24).

I don't take this verse to refer to Jesus' going to the place of the dead and preaching to the spirits there.

One main reason is this: if Peter's point is that Jesus went to preach to all the dead, why would he say that they were once disobedient in the days of Noah? There were thousands and millions of spirits there who had not lived in the days of Noah.

So, I take it mean that Jesus went to preach in the days of Noah to people who, because they rejected that preaching, are NOW in prison awaiting final judgment.

There are three ways that this strengthens us for suffering.

1. It assures us of the greatness of Christ. He is not bound by space and time. He was there preaching thousands of years before and he is here speaking today.

He will be with you, as he said, to the end of the age—just as he is in China and Guinea and Congo and Bangkok and Uzbekistan and Japan and Siberia and the Philippines and Germany and Michigan—wherever you may suffer, both now and forever.

2. It is better to obey him and suffer than to disobey and be cast into the prison of verse 19.

This is what happened to the spirits in Noah's day. They thought it was foolish to heed the call of God like Noah did. So, they stayed comfortable and respectable until the rain started.

This is again why people can be converted with a message that calls for suffering—it is a suffering that will keep them out of eternal prison.

3. It is no disadvantage to you to be a small rejected minority. This is the point in verse 20 where it says that in the ark "*a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water.*"

It must have felt foolish to be such a small minority. But the point is: if you are a minority with God, you will be saved and the tables will be turned. So, when the suffering comes, don't throw away your confidence that has great reward.

The fourth way that Peter strengthens us for suffering is by describing the meaning of baptism.

The flood waters that brought judgment on the world in Noah's day reminds Peter of Christian baptism. Verse 21: "*And corresponding to that [the flood], baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.*"

Verse 18 says that Christ died for sins and brought us to God.

In other words, Christ saves us.

But the question is: who is us?

Whom does Christ's death actually save?

This is what verse 21 answers: those who are baptized.

But Peter knows that this will be misunderstood if he does not qualify it. So, when he says, "*Baptism now saves you,*" he adds, "*Not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience.*"

This is virtually a definition of baptism. Baptism is an outward expression of a spiritual, inward appeal to God for cleansing.

In other words, baptism is a way of saying to God: "I trust you to apply the death of Jesus to me for my sins and to bring me through death and judgment into new and everlasting life through the resurrection of Jesus."

Baptism may cleanse the body because it was by immersion. But that is not why he says it saves.

It saves for one reason: it is an expression of faith.

It is an appeal of faith.

Paul said in Romans 10:13 that "*whoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.*"

Baptism is such a calling. It's an appeal to the Lord.

How does this strengthen us for suffering with Christ?

Like this:

When we have come through the water of baptism, we have passed through death and judgment.

We have been buried with Christ and we have risen with him.

We have passed from death to life. Judgment is past.

The suffering we are experiencing cannot be the condemnation of God.

That has already been experienced for us by Christ.

Baptism stands as a constant reminder that the worst suffering has been averted. Christ took it for us.

We will never have to come into judgment.

There is now no condemnation.

We have already died that death in Christ and been raised in him.

Therefore our present suffering is not the wrath of God but the loving discipline of our Father and the preparation for glory.

One last way Peter strengthens us for suffering:

He shows us that Christ is at the right hand of God ruling over all angels, authorities and powers.

Verse 22: "He is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him."

Take this one thought with you in preparation for your suffering:

No harassing, oppressing, deceiving, accusing demon is free to do as he pleases.

All angels, authorities, powers, devils, evil spirits, demons, and Satan himself are subject to Jesus Christ.

When Peter says at the end of his letter (5:9) that the devil prowls around like a lion seeking to devour, resist him firm in your faith, THIS is the faith he has in mind:

The faith that all angels, authorities and powers are subject to Jesus.

This is what we rebuke and resist the devil with:

You are subject to Jesus. Jesus reigns at God's right hand and you are under him. You can do nothing without his permission. You are a cat on a chain. You cannot touch me unless he lets you.

And he will only let you to the degree that your touch will turn out for my good and for his glory.

So, stand firm believers. Stand firm in this great faith and arm yourselves with the purpose of Christ.

The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. Let's follow him. Amen.