



FAITHFUL LIVING IN A FALLEN WORLD

A SERIES IN FIRST PETER



CHRIST'S SUFFERING AND OUR SALVATION

1 PETER 3:17-22

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INTRO

When I began my study for this sermon, I wasn't quite sure what I would discover, because I was tackling one of the passages that is thought to be one of the most difficult in the NT. Several commentators admitted to that fact, and yet they proceeded to give light and wisdom to the passage so that by the end of the week, I was confident that I had a handle on the meaning of the text.

Now, the entire passage is not difficult. The middle section is, but the beginning and end, while very straightforward, are worthy of our attention and praise, for they are words about the sovereignty and supremacy of Jesus. The sovereignty of Jesus... The supremacy of Jesus... Those are always subjects to make much of, and I hope to make much of them this morning.

The verses just read are fully connected to the preceding verses. In fact, the first verse of my passage today is often included as the last verse in the previous section. So we should briefly review what came in the last set of verses:

We should strive for peace in our relationships.

We should return blessing when we are reviled.

We should have no fear of those who torment us, nor should we be shaken or disturbed, knowing that Christ is holy and sovereign as our ultimate protector.

When we are treated poorly, we should be filled with a hope that makes people curious, and we should be ready to give an answer for that hope.

We should give that answer with gentleness and respect.

And we should leave vengeance for these acts of cruelty and injustice in God's hands. (A tough one sometimes...)

If we are reviled, it should be for the right reasons, and it should be obvious to any reasonable person that the reviling is unfair, and those who are abusing us will be put to shame.

In summary, we can rest and even *rejoice* in our suffering when we understand that God is not surprised by anything and that he has promised to preserve us and protect us from eternal harm. He is faithful, he will surely do it... But he has not yet fully delivered us from the trials of this world, and there are some trials ahead. And this is where Peter picks back up in v17

TEXT

¹⁷ For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.

If we take the beginning and end of this verse, we find a plain logic: It is better to suffer for doing good... than for doing evil. Ok, that makes sense. If you do something good and suffer, that's not on you. If you do evil and suffer, well, there's a reason for your suffering, and the reason is you!

But we might stumble on the middle part of the verse, the words between the ends: "if that should be God's will". If that should be God's will? Is suffering ever according to God's will? Apparently, it can be.

We saw similar teaching in 2:19-20:

^{2:19} For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly.

It is a gracious thing, he says, a sign of God's grace and favour, a blessing from God when we endure sorrows while suffering unjustly. He is not saying that the suffering itself is a good thing, but that the effect of enduring suffering can be *very* good.

^{2:20} 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.

When you do something wrong and suffer for it, there is little to no benefit or blessing in it. But when you've done nothing wrong, or if you've done good and are made to suffer for it, and you endure it - THAT is a blessing from God, a sign of his grace and favour. If you are punished in some way and it is undeserved, and you faithfully endure, there is a blessing in that, and Jesus is the prime example, which we will see shortly.

And so he says again here in 3:17 - "**For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.**" It might seem

odd for him to use a better/worse evaluation scheme when addressing our suffering. How - we might ask - can suffering ever be anything but a worthless waste of time? But it can be so much more than that if we suffer for doing good.

Suffering For Evil vs. Suffering For Good

When we suffer for the evil or wrong we have done, the only reward we gain is taking a few steps (hopefully forward) on the sometimes hard road of sanctification. This is itself a kind of blessing, that God does not simply abandon us to the consequences of our self-made messes but works in that mess to shape us into someone more like Jesus. Aren't you thankful for that? So there is an indirect value when we suffer in that way, but it is a mixed blessing. We carry the heaviness of suffering with the knowledge that we are to blame. But blameless suffering, suffering for doing what is good, is *its own* blessing, and it avails more pure blessing from God. For when we suffer in this way, we suffer as Jesus did.

And these are the sufferings, we should be reminded, that we, along with Paul, will later count as—get this—“light and momentary afflictions.” For some of you, that’s unfathomable right now. Your afflictions are so heavy and seem to endure so long; how could these ever be considered either light or momentary?! And yet, God’s word says that someday this is how we will see them. Place your faith in that. It is true, and it will help you endure your present trial.

When you suffer for doing good, know that you are blessed.

Know that this blessing is active now and will continue to be active in eternity.

But God's word is clear regarding our present plight: suffering will come, there is no doubt.

But when it comes, be sure that it comes due to the good you have done, and not the evil.

Either way, it is under the control of God for his glory and your good, but one type of suffering is preferable to the other.

Know this, dear brothers and sisters in Christ: If you suffer unjustly, it is not by chance. It is by divine assignment. And be assured that he assigns nothing to us or appoints anything for us that does not ultimately result in good. We should feel comforted to know that in our afflictions, God sees us, and we can know that he has led us to this challenge so that while under his protection, we can put forth evidence of our faith.

You might suffer for doing evil, or you might suffer for doing good. Doing good is no guarantee of avoiding suffering, and suffering for doing good can be God's will, his desire, his assignment for you. This suffering is so much better than the suffering that comes about because of doing evil.

The suffering from doing good and the suffering from doing evil may be of the same nature and intensity, but one is better than the other. Why? Because when we suffer for doing good, we are in league with Christ. We are walking in his steps and experiencing the joys of obedience, and we will shortly enjoy the spiritual fruit that follows.

Peter goes on, extolling the virtuous suffering of Christ.

¹⁸For 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,

One of the reasons it is better to suffer for doing good is that when this is the case, we are following the example of Jesus. Of course, the suffering of Jesus accomplished more on our behalf than our suffering ever could, but still, when we suffer as he did, we are joined to him in that suffering.

Peter lists five aspects of Christ's suffering

First, Peter says, Christ died once for all. "Once for all" means that it never needs to be done again. We might say "once for all time": No more daily sacrifices needed. Jesus was the one-time,

all-sufficient, all-encompassing, completely and thoroughly final sacrifice.

Second, Christ suffered for sins. We call this substitutionary atonement; the death of Jesus, he, being the victim, bears the punishment for the sins of others.

Third, he suffered as the righteous one on behalf of the unrighteous. His substitutionary death was on behalf of unrighteous sinners (that's us!) who deserved not the eternal life he provides but the punishing and painful death that he endured. He endured that on our behalf!

Fourth, he did this so that he might “bring us to God.” Jesus died so that, Peter Davids says, “he might reach across the gulf between God and humanity and, taking our hand, lead us across the territory of the enemy into the presence of the Father who called us.”¹ That is a great picture of reconciliation. Reconciliation is the reconnection of our severed relationship with God.

Fifth, he was put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit. His physical death was excruciating, but his experience of death was certainly not a net negative. He was put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit. His spirit was freed from the limitations of his pre-resurrection body. He was not destroyed or in any way permanently snuffed out by his death, and the same will be true of us if we are in him.

His physical life ceased, but his spirit was not extinguished along with his body. His spirit remained alive even while his flesh was dead. Now, Christ did experience spiritual death, not that his spirit ceased to be, but that he was separated from God for a time.

Everyone who is not in spiritual communion with God experiences spiritual death. As part of his redemptive work on our behalf, Jesus

¹ Peter H. Davids, P 136

experienced the cessation of spiritual communion with God (Matt 27: 46):

“And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying... ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’”

That separation must have been intense and excruciating, but it seems to have been over quickly. Shortly after he laments the separation, he says in Luke 23:46:

“Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!’ And having said this he breathed his last.”

IOW - he died in the flesh, leaving behind the challenges of fallen humanity, and was made alive in the spirit. And even today, he lives on as a resurrected person, again acting as the forerunner, showing us what it will be like when we join him in eternity. And unless Jesus returns before we die, our flesh will also one day meet death. Have you thought about this? I think about it sometimes. In one way, I definitely don't want it to happen.

But then I consider this:

The day of our death will be an end for which our living loved ones will mourn, but for the one who dies in Christ, this will be a day of release, of permanent and eternal freedom from sin and temptation and all the negative effects of the fall, of sin in this world. [rpt]

“Who here is looking forward to that day?!”

Let's linger here just a bit longer because what a wonderful opportunity this is to explain and share the gospel. In his death, He became what he was not so that we could become what we were not. Jesus suffered for our sins. He was the only truly righteous one. He was perfectly innocent, faultless, and guiltless. He kept all of God's commands perfectly. Everything he thought, felt and did conformed *exactly* to the will of God.

He, the Righteous One, died for the unrighteous, everyone else. Jesus is the only wholly/holy righteous one, and we are not. We, in our natural state, are the unrighteous ones. Without the saving power of Jesus Christ in our lives, we are treacherous and rebellious. We live in violation of God's standards and we stand guilty in his court.

But the Righteous One brings the many unrighteous ones to God. How does he do this?

In 2 Cor. 5:16-21 we read:

“¹⁶ From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. ¹⁸ All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

This is glorious stuff! Look at v21. He BECAME sin. He took all of your unrighteousness—your treachery, your rebellion, your infinite violations of God's standards. All of your sins he took upon himself. He committed no sin but took all the weight of our sin and shame, and guilt onto himself. We stood guilty, condemned and sentenced before God in his court, and Jesus said, “I'll take the penalty.”

And there was a great exchange: he took on our sin, **he became our sin** so that we could become his perfect righteousness. Consider it! In receiving salvation by faith alone, we became his perfect innocence, faultlessness, and guiltlessness. All of his perfect command-keeping

was attributed to us. He became what he wasn't so that we could become what we were not.

That is worth rejoicing about, amen?

Ok, now we come upon the more difficult section.

¹⁸ ...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.

What is the meaning of this? Well, there is no shortage of theories, no end to the speculation. William Barclay, for example, whom I often quote, sees here, shockingly, a sort of post-death opportunity for salvation. He claims that "This most probably means that in the time between his death and his resurrection, Jesus actually preached the gospel in the realm of the dead – that is to say, to those who in their lifetime had never had the opportunity to hear it. Here is a tremendous thought. It means that the work of Christ is infinite in its range. It means that no one who ever lived is outside the grace of God." I have treasured much of what Barclay has written, but this seems obviously and tragically wrong. There is no post-death opportunity for salvation.

I believe there is a more natural and straightforward explanation. And it is that while his body was laid in the tomb, his spirit went to another place.

Where did his spirit go, and what did he do?

1. He proclaimed.

What did he proclaim? He did not preach the gospel to the souls of people stuck in some kind of purgatory; rather, he announced the triumph accomplished by his death!

He announced his triumph over sin, death, hell, Satan and his demons.

2. He proclaimed to the spirits in prison.

Who are these spirits? They seem to be demons who are said to be in prison.

Why are they in prison? These demons or fallen angels had been disobedient to God during the time of Noah, which is mentioned here in the text.

They were rebels against God who were imprisoned by God.

And we can safely say that it is these same angels mentioned in 2 Peter 2:4-5:

“4 For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell[a] and committed them to chains[b] of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment; 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...”

These also are likely the apostate angels mentioned in Jude v6:

“6 And the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day...”

These angels were with God in heaven, but decided to pursue what was outside of God's boundaries for them. Like Adam and Eve, what God had given them wasn't enough - they wanted more. They rebelled against what God had assigned them to do. They left the place they'd been stationed, like military deserters, and decided to try to have authority over themselves rather than be under the authority of God. They were created to inhabit heaven with God, but they turned from God, deserted their place, dove into sin and as a result, they are now in chains in darkness until the final judgement.

It is likely to these fallen angels that Christ goes between his death and resurrection to proclaim his victory over them, their master, and all the havoc they have caused on the earth. These fallen angels, these evil spirits, were disobedient to God along with the majority of humanity in Noah's time. And God, as we see in the story of Noah, was patient with humanity.

Maybe we don't think of it that way because we usually process the ark story in the space of a children's feature or a movie, but Noah built the ark for 120 years. Consider this: That's like one of us working on a single project starting in 1905 and finishing today! (Gary's trellis?!) That's a long time, and that's a lot of patience on God's part. Plus, according to 2 Peter 2:5, Noah was preaching throughout that time.

But a few people (8) were saved. These people were brought safely through water. In obedience to God, they entered the ark, and in this way, they were saved from the flood. Peter transitions this biblical story into an analogy. There was a relevance to this story for the people to whom Peter was writing. Like Noah, the Christians Peter writes to are a small minority surrounded by godless masses. They are obedient to God, but most people around them are in rebellion against God. But the story also serves as a reminder: like Noah, it is the minority who are obedient to God who are saved, while the rest of the masses perish.

And then Peter writes this in v20. We'll need to take some time with this. He says:

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,

“With this reference,” one scholar says, “Peter... produces one of the most difficult verses in the NT.” Yay! Let's do this. Let's try to understand what is being said here. How does baptism do for us what the ark did for Noah?

Peter shows us here that the way Noah and his family were preserved in the ark is symbolic of our salvation in Christ, **not because** they went into the water but because they were protected from the judgment of the flood. They were preserved in the ark while the whole earth was "immersed in the judgment of God!"

So here is the most important thing to understand: The baptism he speaks of here is *not* water baptism. We make the mistake of seeing the word and idea of baptism too narrowly - more narrowly than the bible itself sees and uses the word. We think: baptism - that's when someone gives their testimony and then gets dunked in the tank (hopefully not getting their head whacked on the edge.) But the bible makes wider use of the word.

To baptize is always to immerse, but not always in water. Sometimes the word is used metaphorically, for example, to describe an overwhelming trial. For example...

Mark 10:38 - "Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?'"

Luke 12:50 - "I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!"

Jesus speaks here of painful and stressful experiences, not of being immersed in water.

In the same way, Noah was immersed in the flood, in the waters that represented the judgment of God, but he was preserved by God by way of the ark. And that's what happens to those who are in Christ. The baptism Peter speaks of here, he clearly says, is not water baptism. It is a spiritual event and reality, not a physical one.

Once we are in Christ, having experienced the baptism of the Holy Spirit, we are saved from the judgment that is coming on those who are not in Christ. In this way, it is our baptism in the Holy Spirit, not our physical baptism in water, that saves us.

Relating this back to Noah, as Peter does, baptism into Christ saves us from the flood of “the judgment to come,” the same way the ark saved Noah from the flood sent by God to judge the world in that day. John MacArthur summarizes this well:

”Just as the flood immersed everyone in the Judgment of God, yet some passed through safely, so the final judgment will fall on all, but those who are in Jesus Christ will pass through safely. Being in Christ is like being in the ark: we ride safely through the storms of judgment.”²

It is union with the resurrected Christ that saves us, not our being baptized with water.

Finally, in v22, Peter says of Jesus that he

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

First, he says, Jesus has gone into heaven. He ascended, and as he ascended, he *transcended* the sphere of powers and principalities over which he now reigns.

Second, Jesus is at the right hand of God. This is a place of power and authority from which he presently reigns.

Third, Jesus reigns over all, over everything and everyone!

Now, remember again the people to whom this letter was written and understand what an encouragement, what wonderful news this is to them! They are under threat from the powers of this world, but they belong to one who is sovereign over earthly powers. And so do we!

CONCLUSION

The truths expressed here are no less true for us today. We are not as severely tried and afflicted as these Christians were, but still, the discomfort and derision we experience at the hands and mouths of those who are opposed to Christ is not the last word. Even in

² Mac, p 68

martyrdom, should our lives come to that result, no one can write an end to our story because we are united to Christ in both his death AND his resurrection. While the power to take our lives is sometimes granted by God to other humans, there is never any such power granted over our souls. And even when we are put to death in the flesh, Jesus has the last word then too, in supplying us with resurrection bodies.

Jesus is sovereign over all and always gets the last word. Although he suffered in the flesh at the hands of men and the forces of darkness, in the end, he was the victor by way of his resurrection. And we will one day have a complete victory and vindication over our unjust suffering as well. Consider this...

Jesus is Not Waiting to Reign

Remember, at all times, that Jesus is not waiting to reign; he reigns already. Jesus, in his physical form, is no longer here on earth but has gone to heaven. Make no mistake, though...

He remains in his incarnated state even though he now resides in the unseen realm... right now, at this moment.

He is sitting at the right hand of God... right now, at this moment.

All angels, authorities, and powers are subject to him... right now, at this moment.

Angels, demons, kings, Prime Ministers, Premiers, Presidents - those who hold these positions are under his authority and sovereignty right now at this moment.

We are not waiting for Jesus to be in charge; he is in charge right now.

Our society may appear to be spiralling out of the control of its human leaders, but it has not exceeded the boundaries of the authority of Jesus by even one inch. Whether we find ourselves suffering under anarchy and tyranny, God has not lost control. As we

endure the sufferings and trials of this life, we do so with the knowledge that this is a blip on the radar of God's eternal reign.

These trials of suffering for doing good will someday be as "light and momentary afflictions" in our memories. Count on it, even if you can't fathom it right now. And the day will come when we reign eternally with Christ. That day is coming! Wait for it with anticipation. Prepare for it as you would prepare for a guest who is en route to your house.

The reign and return of Christ is good news to preach daily to ourselves and to share with others. Let us go and do both.

AMEN

The content of this booklet was written by Michael Krahn, a pastor of Community Bible Church in Ilderton, Ontario. We are a gospel-centered church devoted to the faithful teaching of Scripture, the building up of believers, and bearing witness to Christ in our community and beyond. To learn more, join us for a Sunday service, or connect with us directly, scan the QR code or visit:
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