

1 & 2 Peter: Faith Under Fire

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!
According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the
resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and
unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith
for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.
(1 Peter 1:3-5 ESV)*

United with Christ

December 9th, 2018

1 Peter 3:18-22

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Introduction:

Good morning. Please turn with me in your Bibles to 1 Peter, chapter 3. You'll find that right near the end of your New Testament.

Today's passage contains one of the most contested verses in all of the Bible. That being said, let's get right into the text so that we have the time we need to see through the controversy and to get to the amazing message that God has for us.

Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant and life-giving word to us:

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, 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. (1 Peter 3:18-22 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

You can see why this text is so contested. The debate centres around verses 18-20. Martin Luther has this to say about these verses:

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.¹

I think that's the humble posture we should assume when dealing with a passage like this. The good news is that no matter how you see this verse you end up saying true things about God and about us and our calling and about the suffering and victory of Christ – you just end up saying them in slightly different ways and in a slightly different order. That being said, I want you to know that Pastor Paul and I disagreed on how to interpret verse 19. We are using 4 commentaries for this series, by and large, and wouldn't you know it, 2 went one way and 2 went the other way. And – wouldn't you know it, Pastor Paul agreed with the 2 who went the other way leaving us in the position of writing two fairly different sermons.

Now, as I said – we both end up saying true things about God, us and Jesus – so no one is going home with a heresy gift bag today – but if you want to hear his take then you can find that on the website. We worked through the text at the workshop and Pastor Paul disagrees with me on this – but he loves that I wrestled with the text and he loves what I'm seeing even if it isn't what he's seeing. This is part of the beauty and benefit of our model.

So, with all of that being said, I'd like to walk through this text where we will find the minefield, the metaphor and the message. Let's begin with the minefield.

The Minefield

The interpretive debates center around verses 18 – 20. Let me read that again for you:

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,¹⁹ in which he

¹ Quoted in Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude, The New American Commentary*, vol. 37, 38 vols. (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2003), 184.

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. (1 Peter 3:18-20 ESV)
There are two commonly held interpretations of this verse and both are within the realm of possibility and well within the boundaries of orthodoxy.

One view believes that this verse is explaining how the spirit of Christ was preaching through Noah as he was building the ark. The people heard Noah's preaching, subsequently rejected it and are now in prison awaiting final judgement. There are lots of great reasons to go down this interpretative route, and it leaves you with a text that is encouraging Peter's church to witness faithfully even as they feel surrounded by their hostile culture.

The second view understands these verses to be referring to the spiritual realm. It sees the resurrected Christ declaring the arrival of the kingdom of God to the evil spirits who are now bound in prison. He then takes his victorious seat at the right hand of God the Father. In this view, the main thrust of the passage is assurance and vindication. You are joined with Christ in your present suffering – and that's difficult – but you will one day be joined with Christ in resurrected glory and victory.

Pastor Paul is inclined to agree with the first option, and I am inclined to agree with the second. And that's okay! As a result, we put the emphasis on different syllables. We both agree that this text is about both the hope of vindication and the call to witness faithfully while we wait. We just disagree on which is the main point.

There are a number of reasons why I understand the "spirits in prison" to be referring to angelic beings and not the people of Noah's day. Five of you would find a discussion about my thought process interesting and helpful, but for the sake of the majority I just want to give a brief summary as to what I am seeing in this minefield.

First of all, the Greek word used here for "spirits" typically is not used to refer to human beings. Commentator Peter Davids observes:

"Spirits" in the NT always refers to nonhuman spiritual beings unless qualified... Thus

one would expect it here to mean angelic or demonic beings.²

That feels strange to us, because we talk very little about spiritual beings. We grow suspicious of those who go around talking about angels and demons. But we should note that Peter has no problem talking about such things. In fact, in his second letter to this church he writes:

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; (2 Peter 2:4 ESV)

So, while the concept is shocking and foreign to us, it wasn't so to Peter. Perhaps the most compelling evidence for me is found in verse 22 where Peter concludes the paragraph we're studying today:

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.** (1 Peter 3:21b-22 ESV)

The main reason why I think Peter is talking about angels here is because that's how he concludes his thought – with angels, authorities and powers all having been subjected to Christ.

“But,” you might ask: “Are you really saying that Jesus was preaching to angels??” Now, when we think of the word “preach” we think of providing a gospel invitation, but the Greek word Peter uses has a wider range of meaning. It can mean: “to preach, to proclaim, to declare”. I believe Christ was declaring victory over his enemies. It seems to me that Peter is telling us that the resurrected Christ, upon ascending to the Father, went to preach the coming of the Kingdom of God to the imprisoned rebellious angels.

They thought that the death of Christ was their victory. They thought they had spoken the final word. But Jesus rose from the dead and he told the demons and fallen angels just what that resurrection meant – their plans have been foiled. The resurrected Jesus Christ has conquered our enemy!

² Peter Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter. NICNT.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 139-140.

Now let me tell you why this matters. When the world persecutes us for our faith, it can leave us feeling very frightened. That's what Peter addressed in the text last week. He said:

Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, ¹⁵ but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy (1 Peter 3:14b-15a ESV)

Christ is the only one who is worthy of fear! Not them! They look like they have the upper hand, but they don't – Christ will have the final word. This will involve seasons of suffering – we will need to walk through the valley of suffering just like Jesus did. But this will give way to glory! In the same way that Jesus was raised from the dead and proclaimed his victory to the imprisoned forces of the enemy, so too will we share in the final resurrection! We will be vindicated!

Thomas Schreiner summarizes it this way:

The main point, then, is that believers have no need to fear that suffering is the last word, for they share the same destiny as their Lord, whose suffering has secured victory over all hostile powers.³

Don't be afraid. You're with Jesus, and we know how this story ends. I believe that's what Peter would have us see in the minefield. But Peter has more to say, and he shows it to us in a metaphor.

The Metaphor

Peter now draws our attention to the story of Noah's Ark. It's not surprising to find Peter using Old Testament stories to enforce his argument. Peter LOVED it and he wanted his church to love it too! Speaking of the Old Testament prophets, Peter said earlier in this letter:

It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves **but you**, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look. (1 Peter 1:12 ESV)

The Old Testament is FOR US! It shows us who God is, who we are, and how desperately we need Jesus Christ to be our Saviour. Commentator Edmund Clowney observes:

³ Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude, The New American Commentary*, vol. 37, 38 vols. (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2003), 180.

The inspired authors of the New Testament find in the Old Testament history not merely instances of God's saving power, but also anticipations of his final salvation in Christ.⁴

That's what Peter would have us see in today's text – he sees GOSPEL anticipation in the story of Noah. And he wants to help the persecuted church to see it too.

So, what are we meant to see in this metaphor? First, we see:

1. God's patience

One of the things we are meant to see in the days of Noah is God's patience. Why didn't God simply build the ark for Noah? He created the universe with a breath – you'd think he could build a measly boat. Can you imagine how long it must have taken for Noah to build that thing?

Years and years Noah laboured and with every passing day the people in Noah's day had the opportunity to turn from their sin and to lay claim to a place on the ark. God let that process play out – He showed merciful patience to the wicked people of the world.

God's patience is an important theme in Peter's theology. Elsewhere Peter writes:

The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. (2 Peter 3:9 ESV)

The people in Peter's church were wondering when God was going to intervene. When would He lift them out of their circumstances? How long would he leave them in a rebellious and godless culture? The answer: A little longer still. God is patient, because God is merciful.

Hear that this morning.

Why are we finding ourselves pushed out of our professional fields? Why am I facing so much hostility at work? Why is my spouse so disrespectful of my faith? Why am I not allowed to foster

⁴ Edmund Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter*. (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 164.

and adopt? Does God see this? When will He bring His justice? When will He make it right?

A little longer still. He is patient. He wills that none should perish. So, what do we do while we wait? That's the second lesson in the metaphor:

2. God's plan

While God persists in His patience, He has sent you and I into the world to look and live in a way that is distinct. Peter told us that we should be characterized by a strange hope. Jesus said that we should be like salt and light in the world.

Consider Noah. What a strange sight it must have been as he laboured year after year on that monstrosity – talk about a peculiar hope! Can you imagine how many people would have ridiculed Noah as he busied himself working on the ark each day? But every time he rolled out of bed and grabbed his hammer he was saying to the world: The God of the universe has spoken to me and I'm going to do what He said. Peter describes Noah as:

a herald of righteousness, (2 Peter 2:5b ESV)

Noah's strange, countercultural obedience caused the world to take notice. Does that sound familiar? Doesn't that sound like what we saw in the text last week?

but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you (1 Peter 3:15 ESV)

Peter is telling his church: "I know you're a minority. I know you're surrounded by unrighteousness. But you're not the first ones to experience this. Remember Noah! Be faithful. Be distinct. Be obedient. Be a herald of righteousness."

The most important thing we see in this metaphor is:

3. God's salvation

This is the central and most obvious takeaway from the metaphor. God's patience is naturally leading to something and our faithfulness is meant to point to something. And in the story of Noah, that *something* is the ark.

In this story, we find that the wickedness of mankind had finally reached the point where God's wrath against sin could not be withheld. In Genesis 6 we read:

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. ⁷ So the Lord said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them." (Genesis 6:5-7 ESV)

The flood represents the outpouring of God's wrath against human sin. It was all consuming. It covered the entire earth. Yet, there is a glimmer of gospel hope in this story:

²³ He blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens. They were blotted out from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those who were with him in the ark. (Genesis 7:23 ESV)

In the midst of God's wrath, he provided a means of escape. Anyone who entered into the safety of the ark would be saved. Peter points our attention to the ark and then proceeds to write:

Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, (1 Peter 3:21a ESV)

I said that we had come through the minefield but, in reality, here is another one. What does Peter mean when he says that baptism now saves you?

To answer that question, we need to read the rest of the verse:

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, (1 Peter 3:21 ESV)

That's a helpful qualifier. Thomas Schreiner explains:

The statement about the removal of dirt is made so that believers will not understand

baptism mechanically or superficially. They must attend to what is really happening in baptism.⁵

Peter is saying: “I’m not simply talking about the act of going under the water. I’m talking about the salvation in Christ that it represents.” Perhaps the reason why we see this verse as something of a landmine is because we have unhelpfully separated baptism from conversion in our churches. In the early church, the two went hand in hand. When a person came to put their trust in Jesus Christ, they responded by being baptized. That’s why, when the people asked Peter: “What must we do to be saved?” He replied:

“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38 ESV)

We see the same thing in Acts chapter 8 when Philip led the Ethiopian eunuch to Christ:

³⁵ Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶ And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?” (Acts 8:35-36 ESV)

Somehow, we read those passages and decided to treat baptism as some kind of graduation into spiritual maturity. There are still churches that require believers to memorize catechisms or statements of faith before undergoing baptism. In our attempts to make sure that a person is “ready”, we have unintentionally separated baptism from salvation.

As a result, we commonly understand conversion as that which takes place when someone repents of their sin and makes a profession of faith and then, months or even *years* later, baptism functions as a symbolic expression of that earlier conversion. But in the New Testament church’s theology, Baptism *was* the confession. Peter tells us that, through baptism, we appeal to God for a good conscience. In the early church, a new believer repented of sin and then professed their faith in Jesus Christ *by being baptized*. Which is why Peter could write “Baptism now saves you” without fear of being labelled a heretic.

⁵ Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude, The New American Commentary*, vol. 37, 38 vols. (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2003), 195.

For Noah, the ark was the only escape from the outpouring of God's wrath against sin. Peter would have us see that the ark was pointing forward to Jesus Christ. He is our refuge from the storm. He is the substitute that died in our place. He is our salvation! In the act of baptism we proclaim to the Father – and to the watching world – that we have taken refuge in the ark. We have identified with Christ.

And that's really the message that Peter would have us hear in this text. This is a word for intimidated Christians – Christians who see the mob assembling over the horizon who are now trembling in their boots. He has pointed to spiritual realities and he has pointed back to the days of Noah to reinforce this encouraging message:

The Message: You are United with Christ

That's what baptism is! Baptism is you saying to the world: "I am with Jesus! His death is my death! His life is my life! And his victory is my victory!" Peter is now looking at his beleaguered church and he's saying: "Don't you remember what you were saying when you went through the waters of baptism?"

Baptism signifies first of all that we are:

1. United with Christ in his death

During the act of baptism, as we lower the candidate into the water we say: "United with him in death." That means that we are placing our trust in and identifying with the death of Jesus Christ. That's what Peter is calling for in verse 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, (1 Peter 3:18 ESV)

In the act of baptism, we are affirming that the righteous one suffered for our sins. Jesus didn't die for his own sins – he was perfectly holy. He died for my sins and he did it once and for all. This isn't a sacrifice that needs to be repeated again and again. He took my sins to the cross, he

endured the punishment that I deserved, and he settled the debt that I owed. I once was living a life of sin. I once was a rebel who was bound for destruction.

But Jesus came. Jesus suffered. Jesus died. And now I'm free! The old me – the me that was enslaved to sin – is gone! He went under the water and he never came back up. He died on the cross with Jesus.

When we wrap our hearts and minds around that reality, it becomes a far easier task to endure worldly hostility for the sake of the gospel, doesn't it? Edmund Clowney writes:

Our willingness to suffer for the sake of Christ is grounded in the wonder of Christ's willingness to suffer death for our sake.⁶

So, Peter is telling us, when the world presses in on you and you are tempted to compromise – when you feel that tug in your spirit to settle back into your former way of living – remember the price that Jesus paid to set you free. You are united with Christ in his death. But that's not where the story ends, is it? No! Peter goes on to say that if you are united with him in death and that means that you are also:

2. United with Christ in his resurrection

Peter writes:

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. (1 Peter 3:21-22 ESV)

This passage is about victory! When you came up out of those waters you heard the words: “and raised with him to newness of life!” Do you remember that? And everyone cheered, and you were full of joy! Because in that moment, you declared to the world that you know how this story ends. They can kill you. They can even bury your body in the ground. But it won't stay there! You are united with Christ and, therefore, just as he rose up out of that tomb so too will you rise up out of

⁶ Edmund Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter*. (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 154.

that grave!

This resurrection hope needs to be our fuel when the storm rolls in.

Because we're prone to despair, aren't we? If we can make mountains out of molehills, then what will we make out of the real waves of persecution that roll in?

Times are changing. The media is far more hostile than it once was. The court of public opinion consistently rules against believers. It feels as if it's going to get a whole lot worse before it gets better.

But that's okay, Peter says. Fix your eyes back on Jesus. Remember back to that baptism. This is what you signed up for! You are united with Christ in his suffering, so brace yourself for some difficult seasons. But, don't for a second forget that you are also united with Christ in his victory! The world can rage against Christ and his people all day long, but we know that he has already won. We need to rest in that. We need to DELIGHT in that! We need to let that blessed assurance blow like wind into our sails.

Now, let's be very clear: Peter is not encouraging his church to be vindictive. He's not telling us to lie in bed fantasizing the incoming destruction of all of our foes.

On the contrary, he has been calling us to preach! He's been calling us to respond to the insults that the world throws at us with blessings. He's called us to submit to evil emperors, merciless masters and unbelieving husbands in order that we might win some. He's called us to endure suffering so that they might be saved!

But here he reminds us that we might not win our merciless master for Christ. He might beat you and mistreat you for a lifetime in spite of all of your kindness towards him. Your emperor might light you on fire and use you to light up his garden like Nero did. Your unbelieving spouse might ultimately leave you because of your faith.

But Peter reminds his church that one day everyone will answer to the Lord. The fallen angels received a fresh reminder of this as the resurrected Christ declared the arrival of his kingdom on

his way to the throne of God. He has now:

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

Every once in a while, when our heads are hanging low, we need to remind ourselves that Jesus has already done his victory strut past our accuser. He has won! And we are united with him. We're suffering with him now, and we will surely be glorified with him in the end. Don't despair. Don't give in. Play the long game. Hold fast to Jesus. This is how we overcome, and this is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.