

PREVAILING IN A HOSTILE WORLD

1 Peter 3:19-21

INTRODUCTION

- The Christians to whom Peter wrote this letter lived under the reign of Nero, whose bloodthirsty rage against the church is well known
- The apostle comforts them in their present suffering, and prepares them for future suffering, showing the *reality* of suffering in the Christian life, the *purpose* of it, and the proper *response* to it
- As the secular, humanist, antichrist ideology increasingly dominates our society, we need these truths to help us navigate the dark days we are facing
- The suffering Christian who is equipped with these truths is protected against the despair, bitterness and defeat that many others have succumbed to
- Rather, we are enabled by God to view our sufferings as the means by which we are perfected and God is glorified
- God's glory in suffering is demonstrated most clearly in Jesus Christ (v.18)
- He suffered the most cruel violence at the hands of wicked men, yet it was in such degrading humiliation that God was most highly exalted
- Even as God brought glory to himself through the suffering of his Son, so he is glorified through the suffering of his saints
- The verses we are studying today are some of the most difficult to interpret in the New Testament
- Peter has introduced the example of Christ's suffering in v.18, but in v.19 enters into a digression into Christ's preaching to imprisoned spirits who were disobedient in Noah's day, then describes the ark and those who were saved on it, before digressing further into the ordinance of baptism and its significance
- In 2 Peter 3:16, Peter described some of Paul's writings as containing "some things hard to be understood", yet the same may be said of things Peter himself wrote!
- When we come to a difficult passage like this, we should not dismiss it or skim over it – *all* scripture is inspired by God and *all* scripture is profitable to us, including the difficult texts

- And so, realising that many godly men have interpreted this variously, and realising we are fallible creatures, we seek to study the text using the means of interpretation to correctly understand it
- Chief to a correct interpretation is remembering the context of the verses, which is suffering for doing good (v.17), illustrated by Christ, who suffered and rose again (v.18), and who is ascended into heaven with all authority (v.22), encouraging us to likewise suffer for God's glory (4:1)
- Vv.19-21 may be viewed as a parenthesis, bracketed by the resurrection of Christ at the end of v.18 and the end of v.21
- The overriding theme here is Jesus Christ, victorious over suffering, and bringing victory to his flock who suffer for his sake

I. CHRIST PREACHES TO THE WORLD (19)

A. Christ preaching by the Spirit

1. Note the opening words of v.19 – “by which also” – which refers to the Spirit in v.18
2. Christ (the Second Person of the Godhead) is preaching by the Spirit (the Third Person of the Godhead)

B. Christ preaching to the spirits in prison

1. There are varied views as to who these spirits are, when Christ preached to them, and what he preached
2. One widely held view is that Christ descended to hell between his death and resurrection and preached to the unbelievers of Noah's day
 - a. This is a view of great antiquity, held by Clement of Alexandria (c. AD 200)
 - b. Some proponents of this position teach the heretical doctrine of a “second chance” being offered to these damned spirits in hell
 - c. Others say rather that Christ was proclaiming his triumph over sin, Satan and death, and announcing their certain doom
3. Another view is that Christ preached his victory to angelic beings, rather than humans
 - a. Some say this was done between his death and resurrection, others at his ascension
 - b. The term “spirits” lends weight to this position

- c. These are said to be the fallen angels (sons of God) of Genesis 6:2,4 who corrupted the daughters of men, producing a race of giants (Nephilim) prior to the flood
 - d. These are referred to in 2 Peter 2:4, as being in a part of hell called *tartarus*, in chains of darkness, reserved unto judgment
4. Others see the preaching taking place during the days of Noah
- a. Some say that Christ himself in a pre-incarnate form personally preached to the antediluvian sinners
 - b. The more commonly held position is that Christ preached through Noah, by the Spirit, to his generation
 - c. Augustine (c. AD 400) taught this view
 - d. While the term "spirits" (*pneumasin*) is more often used of angelic beings, it is used of the immaterial part of men after death in Hebrews 12:23
 - e. "For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also" (James 2:26)

C. Noah preached to an unbelieving world

1. He is called a "preacher of righteousness" (2 Peter 2:5)
2. He preached for some 120 years both with his mouth, and by his actions (Hebrews 11:7)
3. As with all the prophets of old, it was the "Spirit of Christ" in him that inspired him and gave him utterance (1 Peter 1:11)
4. Through his Spirit-filled preaching, the Spirit strove in the hearts of men (Genesis 6:3)
5. God showed his longsuffering in waiting 120 years before sending the flood (Genesis 6:3; cf. Genesis 15:16)
6. The wicked world mocked and despised Christ's warnings through Noah, causing them to perish in the flood, and their spirits to descend into the prison of hell, awaiting the final judgment (Revelation 20:13-13)

D. This is an encouragement to persecuted believers

1. As God did not leave Noah alone to testify his righteousness and judgment to a hostile world, but assisted him, speaking through him, so

- too, God has not left us alone to preach the gospel to the world, but promises, “Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world” (Matthew 28:20)
2. Though for a time, the wicked may prosper and the righteous suffer, the day soon comes when the wicked are drowned in God’s judgment and cast into the infernal prison, while the righteous rest from their labours in paradise (Matthew 24:37-39)
 3. Only eight people were saved from the flood, while the rest of humanity perished in unbelief – God’s people have always been a minority, a “little flock”, persecuted and mocked by the majority of a godless world, yet it is this “few” who enter into life, while the “many” go to destruction (Matthew 7:13-14)
 4. Rejoice if you are in the minority with God, and not the majority with Satan!

II. CHRIST PRESERVES FROM THE WORLD (20)

A. Noah and his family were saved

1. The word for “saved” (*diasodzo*) is not used in the New Testament for salvation from sin, but to rescue or deliver from a hazard or danger, to bring safely through
2. They were saved “by” or rather, “through” water, that is, the flood waters which destroyed the world and the ungodly
3. It was the ark that effectively saved them, which is a type of Christ
 - a. It was divinely provided (John 3:16)
 - b. It was the only means of deliverance (Acts 4:12)
 - c. It had only one door (John 14:6)
 - d. It was perfectly secure (John 6:37; 10:28)
 - e. It protected from judgment
 - f. It carried souls between worlds
4. God separated and saved those believers on the ark from the ungodly world system by means of the waters of the flood
5. As believers, we are no longer united with this ungodly world, but are rather at enmity with it, and it with us (John 15:19; 17:16; James 4:4)

6. We are commanded, and have a desire to be separated from the world (2 Corinthians 6:17)
7. As Noah entered the ark he was saved from judgment, and when the flood came he was separated from the world, so too by coming to Christ we find salvation from sin, and through the waters of baptism we are separated from this evil world

III. CHRIST IS PROFESSED TO THE WORLD (21)

- A. The waters of the flood are a figure of baptism
 1. The word “figure” (*antitupon*) indicates a pattern
 2. Just as the ark is a type (figure/shadow) of justification by faith in Christ, so the waters of the flood are a type of Christian baptism
 - a. They are both given by divine authority (Matthew 21:25)
 - b. They are both derided and rejected by most
 - c. They are both attacked and corrupted by Satan and his false teachers
 - d. As Noah and his family by faith first entered the ark before the waters engulfed the earth, so a person must first by faith come to Christ before they can be baptised
 - e. Both are said to “save” – the ark from death, the water from the world – likewise, Christ saves us from sin, while baptism saves or separates us from an ungodly world
 - f. Those merely in the water without the ark were drowned – those who are merely baptised without faith in Christ are damned – it is the *believing* that justifies, not the baptising (Mark 16:16)
- B. Baptising does not remove sin
 1. As if to pre-empt any misunderstanding of his teaching on baptism and salvation, Peter immediately qualifies it by saying that baptism is “not the putting away of the filth of the flesh” – that is, baptism can in no way wash away our sin
 2. In spite of such a clear statement refuting baptismal regeneration, this damnable heresy crept into the churches from the second century AD, and has today corrupted many churches and denominations

- a. Roman Catholic – “By Baptism all sins are forgiven, original sin and all personal sins, as well as all punishment for sin” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Section 1263, 1994)
 - b. Anglican – “Baptism is not only a sign of profession, and mark of difference, whereby Christian men are discerned from others that be not christened, but is also a sign of Regeneration or new Birth, whereby, as by an instrument, they that receive Baptism rightly are grafted into the Church; the promises of the forgiveness of sin, and of our adoption to be the sons of God by the Holy Ghost, are visibly signed and sealed; Faith is confirmed, and Grace increased by virtue of prayer unto God. The Baptism of young Children is in any wise to be retained in the Church, as most agreeable with the institution of Christ.” (*39 Articles of Religion*, Article 27)
 - c. Reformed – “God, regenerating us in baptism, ingrafts us into the fellowship of his Church, and makes us his by adoption . . . whatever time we are baptized, we are washed and purified . . . forgiveness, which at our first regeneration we receive by baptism alone . . . forgiveness has reference to baptism” (John Calvin, *Institutes*, 4:17:1, 4:15:3, 4)
 - d. Lutheran – “Baptism effects forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and grants eternal salvation to all who believe, as the Word and promise of God declare.” (Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*, IV)
 - e. Churches of Christ – “That in and by the act of immersion, or soon as our bodies are put under water, at that very instant our former or old sins are all washed away, provided only that we are true believers...Who will not concur with me in saying that, Christian Immersion is the Gospel in Water?” (Alexander Campbell, *Campbell/Rice Debate*)
3. Baptism is a righteous act or work that believers are called to do (Matthew 3:15), and it is “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us” (Titus 3:5)
 4. Those who add the work of baptism to faith in Christ as the means of salvation have violated God’s grace and are trusting in a false gospel that cannot save (Romans 11:6)
- C. Baptism is the answer of a good conscience toward God
1. This is one of the clearest definitions of baptism in the Bible
 2. The conscience is the faculty within man that discerns between good and evil (Romans 2:15)

- a. In our lost state, our consciences are defiled (Titus 1:5) and evil (Hebrews 10:22)
- b. The blood of Christ is the only means by which our conscience may be cleansed from evil and enabled to function aright under the control of the Holy Spirit (Hebrews 10:22)
3. The word for “answer” (*eperotema*) means “a decision, appeal, interrogation”
4. Hence, the new believer having been regenerated and renewed in his conscience, is led by the Spirit of God (1 Corinthians 12:13) to follow the Lord in baptism, thereby making a public proclamation of his faith and allegiance to Jesus Christ
 - a. Note that as it was “by which” (v.19) the Holy Spirit the word was preached to the ungodly in Noah’s day, so too it is the same Spirit by which a believer in good conscience enters the waters of baptism
5. It is saying, “I have trusted Christ, even as Noah trusted God and entered into the ark, I trust Christ to save me from my sins by his sacrifice, to deliver me from death by his death, to raise me up by his resurrection, and to lead me in a life of holiness, separate from this evil world, even as the waters separated Noah from the ungodly world of his day”
6. Baptism is an identifying with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection (Romans 6:3-4)
7. Baptism is a “putting on” of Christ (Galatians 3:27), in the same way that a soldier puts on a uniform – the uniform does not make him a soldier, but shows to the world he is a soldier
8. Baptism is a uniting of the believer in membership to the body of Christ, the church (1 Corinthians 12:13)
9. “In the early days of the church, baptism was a declaration that the believer was definitely identifying himself with that group of people who were called Christians and were despised and hated. To be a Christian meant something. To identify yourself with those who were called Christians meant persecution, maybe death; it meant being ostracized from your family, shunned by friends. And the one act which was the final declaration of this identification was BAPTISM. As long as a man gathered with Christians, he was tolerated, but when once he submitted to baptism, he declared to all the world, I BELONG TO THIS DESPISED GROUP, and immediately he was persecuted, hated, and despised. In baptism, therefore, the believer entered into the fellowship of the sufferings of Christ. A person might be a believer and keep it

strictly a secret and thus avoid unpleasantness and suffering, but once he submitted to public baptism he had burned his bridges behind him....” (Dr. M. R. DeHaan)

D. It is the resurrection of Christ that makes all this effectual

1. God in his mercy “hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3)
2. Baptism pictures this – as the believer is immersed in the water, he is saying, “my old life of sin is dead”; as he rises from under the water he is saying, “I am raised with Christ to walk in newness of life”

CONCLUSION

1. As the world becomes more and more wicked, the division between the children of light and the children of darkness becomes starker
2. The days preceding the Lord’s return will be similar to the days preceding the flood, and we can see those similarities all around us
3. Very soon God will pour out his wrath upon an ungodly world, and the vast majority of humanity will perish
4. Only a small band of despised and persecuted believers will be spared the judgment, and be received safely into the next world
5. When that dreadful day comes, will you be found among the redeemed, or among the damned?
6. Will you like Noah, rely upon the grace of God alone to deliver you from sin, the world and coming judgment?
7. Will you like Noah, proclaim the word of Christ in your speech and in your deeds to your godless generation?
8. Will you like Noah, persevere in season, out of season, in spite of opposition and little apparent results?
9. Will you like Noah, take a particular interest in the souls of your family, doing everything possible to ensure they enter into life also?
10. Will you like Noah, offer yourself in worship to God for his mercy and grace in providing you with salvation through the sacrifice of his Son?