

Week 18 - Christ's Triumphal Suffering - 1Peter 3:18-22

Scripture Reading: Colossians 1:15-23

Introduction

Our passage this morning is one of, if not the, most difficult passages in the New Testament to interpret with any degree of certainty

Even Martin Luther is quoted as having said of 1Peter 3:18-22 -

"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."

What is clear is that Peter intends the passage to be a kind of illustration that sheds light on what he has been teaching

We saw that last week when we looked at the purpose for verse 18 that begins with the word "for" showing the reason we should be willing to suffer for the sake of others is that Christ suffered unjustly in order to bring us to God

Because our patient endurance in the face of unjust suffering can serve as a witness to others and lead them to Christ

But then Peter introduces "Christ going" and "Christ proclaiming" and "spirits in prison" and "the days of Noah" and says that baptism "now saves you" leading us into some pretty deep weeds and leaving us with a great many questions

However, when we look at the passage within the context of the letter as a whole, we see the truth emerge that Christ's innocent suffering was triumphant so we know that we will also triumph over our unjust suffering

Remember, Peter's original audience were experiencing harsh treatment and suffering during their sojourn as exiles

And Peter wrote to them to encourage them by reminding them of God's sovereign care and the reward awaiting them in heaven as he called for them to persevere in leading holy lives as an example to the world around them

And I believe that the ultimate triumph of Christ-followers as foreshadowed by Christ's triumph is Peter's point in including what for us is a very confusing passage that seems to muddy more than it clarifies when one first reads it

As I told some of you this week while I was studying and preparing this sermon, you are going to hear a lot of "I'm not sure," "I think this is right," "but I could be wrong" coming out of the pulpit today

And I'm in good company as even the experts who right commentaries on the Bible disagree with one another and make rational arguments for various interpretations with most of their arguments sounding reasonable when you read them

The story is told of a young, single minister who was invited regularly to dine in the homes of his congregation

And he noticed that every time he went to the home of one particular elderly woman, she served him sweet potatoes

It didn't matter what the main course was, there were always sweet potatoes

At first he didn't think anything of it but, over time, he began to wonder about it because the sweet potatoes didn't always go well with the other dishes served

So one day he got up the nerve to ask about them

And she said, "Well, Pastor, I remember you saying from the pulpit that the common taters disagree with you"

Keep that story in mind when you hear these verses explained differently later because I'll tell you right up front that at least some of the "common taters" aren't going to agree with everything I say today

But then again, they don't all agree with each other either so I don't feel too badly

Let me encourage you to join me in your Bible in 1Peter 3 and follow along as I read the passage in its entirety

[1Peter 3:18-22]

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, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, 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. 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, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

Let's begin by looking quickly at verse 18 which tells us that Christ died but is alive

I. Christ - Died but Is Alive

I believe Peter used the word "suffered" in order to match the theme of suffering by his original audience

Jesus used the same word in **Luke 22:15** during the Last Supper saying:

"I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer." in obvious reference to his pending suffering unto death on the cross

And Peter says that Christ suffered and died once meaning that Christ's suffering and dying for sins has been completed and need not be repeated

The author of Hebrews makes this same point in Hebrews 10 and specifically in **Hebrews 10:10-14** which says:

And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

And Jesus' death was the righteous, singular, dying for the unrighteous, plural but notice that Peter adds the clause, "in the flesh" to describe Christ's death

The contrast Peter is highlighting is between the physical, visible things of this world and invisible things which exist in the unseen or spiritual world

So he states that Christ was put to death in the physical world but made alive in the spiritual realm which, in the New Testament, is typically the realm of all things that are eternal

And that fits into Peter's emphasis in the letter on the relative unimportance of temporary suffering in this world when compared to enjoying a glorious, eternal inheritance in the next

Our Lord willingly suffered physical harm unto death to bring us to God so that we might enjoy eternal, spiritual gain

Again, followers of Christ shouldn't be surprised to find themselves following in his steps for the sake of others

So far we can easily understand Peter's argument here but when we get to verse 19, things change

Let's look again at verse 19 [**1Peter 3:19**] where Peter writes:

"...in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison,

Having just said in verse 18 that Jesus was made alive in the spirit, Peter now says that Jesus went somewhere in the spirit and proclaimed something to the spirits in prison

Verse 19 contains nine words in the original Greek and one scholar I ran across in my study made the claim that the meaning of each word varies and the meaning of each word has been understood differently by Bible scholars

And as we read the verse we find we are faced with three questions:

1. Who are the spirits in prison?
2. What did Christ proclaim to them?
3. When did he proclaim it?

Let's see if we can come up with acceptable answers to those questions as we consider Christ's proclamation

II. Christ's Proclamation

As I said in the beginning of this sermon, Bible scholars have given a variety of answers to those three questions and their answers basically arrange themselves into five common views

There are actually many more views but they tend to be rearrangements of the elements of the five common views

I am indebted to Dr. Wayne Grudem for the description of these five views:

The **first** view is that, when Noah was building the ark, Christ "in spirit" was in Noah preaching repentance and righteousness through him to unbelievers

The **second** view is that, after Christ died, he went and preached to people in hell, offering them a second chance at salvation

The **third** view is that, after Christ died, he went and preached to people in hell, proclaiming to them that he had triumphed over them and their condemnation was final

The **fourth** view is that, after Christ died, he proclaimed release to people who had repented before they died in the flood, and led them out of their imprisonment, in Purgatory, into heaven

And the **fifth** view is that, After Christ died, he traveled to hell and proclaimed triumph over the fallen angels who had sinned by marrying human women before the flood

Each of the last four views would fit within the thought expressed in the Apostles' Creed which states in part:

[Jesus] suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. The third day he arose again from the dead."

The creed is familiar to most of us and, unfortunately, many of us may have based our doctrinal understanding on it

However, the Apostles' Creed is not found anywhere in the Bible and it was written long after all the apostles had died and nowhere in the Bible does it explicitly say that Jesus was in hell during the three days prior to his resurrection

And you will note that Peter, in our passage, does not mention hell or descend - it says Jesus "went" somewhere where he could proclaim to "prisoners"

The biblical view is that Jesus' body went into the tomb and his spirit went to paradise as he told the thief who called upon him as they hung dying

Personally, I believe that some of the views are disqualified when considered in the context of the entire Bible and that there are two main contenders for what Peter is talking about

For instance, nowhere do we have any indication in the Word of God that anyone is given a second chance at salvation

As appealing as that idea sounds, **Hebrews 9:27** tells us that we die and then face judgment

And the story of the rich man and the beggar, Lazarus, in Luke 16 shows us that those who die in an unredeemed state don't have a change of heart simply because they have died and find themselves in torment

The rich man didn't seek forgiveness but only temporary relief and a witness for his brothers but he remained at enmity with God in his heart even while suffering

Also, there is no evidence in the Bible for the concept of Purgatory where people go to suffer for a time for the sins they committed while they were on this earth

Rather we are told that the death of Christ is sufficient for those who believe

We saw that a few minutes ago when we looked at Hebrews 10 but we also find it in **Hebrews 7:27**

He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself.

And we have Ephesians 2:8-9 telling us plainly that salvation is by God's grace alone and our works play no part in it. For those reasons it seems to me that second and fourth views are disqualified and the third view that Jesus went to effectively rub salt in the wounds of the people then in hell seems unwarranted and, frankly, unlike Christ.

So it seems to me that the first view concerning Noah and the fifth view concerning fallen angels are the only viable choices we need to consider.

The word "spirit" is used to mean both good and evil angels and humans who have died in various places in the Bible and in all cases the context determines whether an angelic or human spirit is in view.

So let's look at verse 20 where Peter continues giving qualifiers as to whom he has in mind.

Peter writes that the spirits he has in mind were in prison [**1Peter 3:20a**] –

...because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared

The phrase, "did not obey," speaks of active disobedience or open rebellion against God and we see that the disobedience took place during the time when Noah was building the ark.

Those who hold to view 5, the one that says fallen angels are who Christ proclaimed to, look to **Genesis 6:1-4** for support.

When man began to multiply on the face of the land and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive. And they took as their wives any they chose. Then the LORD said, "My Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years." The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of man and they bore children to them. These were the mighty men who were of old, the men of renown.

According to this view, the sons of God are angels and their disobedience in copulating with human women was the disobedience.

As you might expect, this is also a widely disputed passage even though it seems to find support in Job where angels are referred to as "sons of God" twice in Job 1:6 and Job 2:1.

On the other hand, we see five references to believers being called "sons of God" found in Matthew 5:9; Luke 20:36; Romans 8:14, 19; and Galatians 3:26.

Matthew 5:9 tells us *"Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God"*

And **Romans 8:14** says that *"all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God"* just to look at two of those references. So it would seem uncertain that Peter's original audience would have automatically understood the disobedient ones to be fallen angels.

And reading further in Genesis 6 we see that it was the wickedness of man that resulted in God flooding the earth and that God was sorry that he had made man on the earth - not that he was angry with fallen angels.

Look with me at **Genesis 6:5-8**

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. And the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. 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." But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.

So the entire section immediately preceding the command to build the ark clearly emphasizes human sin, and human sin alone, as the reason God brings the flood upon the earth.

The text doesn't say that God was sorry he made angels, but that he made man and God didn't decide to blot out the fallen angels, but man.

We also have New Testament evidence for the view that Noah was preaching repentance as he was building the ark.

In **2Peter 2:5**, Peter refers to Noah as *“a herald of righteousness”*

And in Matthew 24 and Luke 17, Jesus clearly emphasizes human disregard of impending judgment in the days of Noah
Then in **Matthew 24:37** Jesus says that a similar situation will occur again and the coming of the Son of Man will be as it was in the days of Noah

Next, we need to consider for whom was the patience of God waiting in the days of Noah?

This strongly suggests that God was waiting for repentance and nowhere in Scripture do we have any indication that fallen angels ever have an opportunity to repent

Our understanding is that, since they are spiritual beings who dwelt in the presence of God before falling, God does not offer them repentance

2Peter 2:4 tells us that *“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”*

And **Jude 1:6** says similarly *“...the angels who did not stay within their position of authority, but left their proper dwelling [God] is keeping in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of that great day”*

But it is repeatedly stated in Scripture that God waits patiently for humans to repent of their disobedience before he brings judgment upon them

So we might rightly ask why Peter would refer to the disobedient people of Noah’s day as “spirits” when they would have obviously had bodies as well

I believe this is explained when we look at the text as meaning “spirits who are now in prison” at the time of Peter’s writing but who were people on the earth at the time of Noah when Christ came proclaiming to them

Consider it this way; we can rightly say that President Joe Biden was born on November 20, 1942

That’s an appropriate and true statement even though Joe Biden was not President when he was born because what we mean is that “he who is now President Biden was born on November 20, 1942”

Likewise, it’s not a stretch at all to speak of those who were later “in prison” in the way Peter does while speaking of their activity beforehand while they were still on the earth

Does all this mean we can say with absolute certainty what Peter meant by this illustration?

No, it doesn’t and you could spend a great deal of time studying all the different views and the arguments that support them and still only be convinced but not certain of any of them

I believe that the first view is the most logical but I hold that conclusion very, very loosely ready to be shown that I am mistaken

But it does seem to fit the evidence the best as I see it and it seems to serve Peter’s purpose for the letter best

Remember, Peter is writing to encourage sojourning Christ-followers who are surrounded by those who disparage them

Likewise, Noah and his family were likewise a minority of righteous individuals surrounded by unbelievers

And Noah witnessed boldly to those around him just as Peter encourages his readers to do

Noah realized that God’s judgment was coming soon and, as we are going to see when we get a little further along in Peter’s letter, he reminds them that God’s final judgment is imminent

And by speaking of Christ’s proclaiming through Noah, Peter reminds his readers of the reality that Christ is still working in the unseen, spiritual realm and empowering them in their witness making it spiritually effective

Also, just as God was waiting patiently in the days of Noah for the repentance of unbelievers, we know that God is patiently waiting today before he brings his final judgment on the world

Then, finally, just as Noah was saved with “a few” others, Peter gives his readers the encouragement that they, even though they may perhaps be few, will finally be saved because Christ has triumphed and has all things subject to him

Speaking of Noah and his family being saved, we need to turn our attention to the question of what Peter means in what he says about baptism in verse 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,

And the question that immediately springs to mind is “Is Peter denying that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone and saying that baptism is required for salvation?”

III. Does Baptism Save?

Either Peter’s mention of Noah being brought safely through water reminded Peter of baptism or baptism was the reason Peter chose to use Noah to illustrate his point

Either way, Peter says that baptism corresponds to Noah’s escaping through water in that the water of baptism is in some ways a counterpart to the waters of the flood

The water of baptism serves to illustrate judgment like the water of the flood because it represents the death we deserve for our sins and coming up out of the water corresponds with God keeping Noah safe through the flood

Baptism shows how, in one sense, we have died and been raised again anew but in another sense we come up out of the water knowing that we are still alive and have passed through the waters of God’s judgment unharmed

And Peter makes his point clear in a rather cloudy manner by saying that “baptism now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body” - in other words, not as an outward, physical act - the act of baptism isn’t what saves a person

And he continues, “...but as an appeal to God for a good conscience” - that is to say an inward, spiritual transaction between God and the individual and it’s that transaction that is symbolized by the outward ceremony of baptism

We know from other passages in the Bible that salvation is through repentance and reliance on the shed blood of Christ and our future is guaranteed by the resurrection of Christ from the dead

Peter alludes to that when he says our appeal to God for a clean conscience is “through the resurrection of Christ”

And that tells us that it’s not even a request to God that actually provides the basis for our salvation because it has been earned by Christ making it have nothing to do with any kind of performance by us and baptism is simply a picture

A good paraphrase of Peter’s words, therefore, would be “Baptism now saves you - not the outward physical ceremony of baptism but the inward spiritual reality which baptism represents”

Peter closes out this section of his letter with verse 22 which says that [**1Peter 3:22**]

[Jesus] has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him

This would have again served as a great encouragement to Peter’s original audience and should to us as well as we sojourn here

Because when Paul writes in **Ephesians 2:6** that the followers of Jesus Christ have been raised up by God and seated with Christ in the heavenly places we understand that we also share in the spiritual authority that belongs to Christ

And that means that we can have power in spiritual warfare, freedom from fear, and authority to rebuke the forces that oppose us

Conclusion

I think you will agree that this is a truly difficult passage and one that we can neither readily or fully understand with absolute certainty

What we can be certain of and confidently proclaim, however, is that Christ has successfully suffered for us and triumphed over death and the forces of evil

All who are true followers of Jesus Christ have been cleansed of all their sin; past, present, and future, and can rightly be said to have a clean conscience before God as symbolized through baptism

And because Christ has been granted victory over every force, good or bad, in the universe, we know that we too will emerge from this life victorious and the difficulties we face as we sojourn here are temporary

We have necessarily dealt with matters this morning that are somewhat impenetrable but they are also not of first importance

And it would be unfortunate if all that came out of today was for us to focus on what are actually side issues so as to enter into debate about them

Godly men and women disagree about most of what we have looked at this morning and that's perfectly fine - I did my best to present a logical reasoning for my conviction while making sure you understand that I hold it loosely

I could be wrong

And, if truth is determined by the number of people who believe something, I probably am

If your understanding is different so be it - as long as you have made a thorough study of the issues and formed your beliefs accordingly, be thoroughly convinced in your own mind as Paul says in Romans 14:5 and live accordingly

We don't have to agree on matters that are not of first, or, most likely, even secondary, importance

But what I want us all to agree on is that we can confidently rely on the person and work of Jesus Christ while we sojourn here and be willing to stand for him as his witnesses in this place

God will not be patient forever and the day is approaching when he will judge those who remain alienated from him

Until that time we have a job to do

Let's pray

Colossians 1:15-23 (page 983)

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.