

1 Peter 3: 18-22 Christ, Noah and Baptism

This is, with no exaggeration, one of the most disputed and argued over passages in the New Testament. Peter takes us from Christ's suffering on the cross, to Christ preaching to spirits in prison, whoever and wherever they were, to Noah building an ark, and then links that in some way to baptism –which on first sight apparently saves us, and then finishes with Christ's ascension and exaltation in glory, with everything made subject to Him.

So Peter sure covers some ground here. And between an amazing beginning – the cross of Christ- and an amazing end – the exaltation of Christ, Peter is going somewhere. It's just not entirely clear where he's going. So to get our brains round this we're going to put this passage in it's context. Peter's writing to these first century Christians who are beginning to face opposition for being Christians. Nero's the emperor, and whilst violent persecution hasn't yet reached it's peak, things are beginning to heat up for these Christians and Peter is writing to them to encourage them to stand firm.

Now the opposition they are facing, so far - is mostly verbal. In v16 Peter tells them how to respond when they're *slandered*, when they're *reviled*. Then in v17 Peter says 'For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, then for doing evil.'

Now sometimes, when we suffer, we deserve it. We do something wrong, we sin, we screw up and then we simply reap what we've sowed. We pay the price for what we've done. If you drink heavily, fall and break your leg, it's painful, you're suffering, but it's not innocent suffering. If you fiddle your expense claims, get caught, lose your job, you suffer. But it's not undeserved suffering. But when you do what's right and people turn on you; you try and live in such a way to honour God and your friends mock you because you're not sleeping around, or getting drunk, or doing drugs. That's undeserved suffering. If like these Christians, you start facing ridicule at school, or are looked over for promotion at work, because you don't 'fit in'. That is suffering for doing good.

And it's knowing that: that Christians like them and you and I, sometimes face difficulties and trials for doing what's right, that opens the door for what Peter says in this passage. That's the door Peter walks through into this passage. And the door at the other end is chapter 4v1 where Peter says 'Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking.'

So the door into this passage is suffering for being a Christian and the door out of this passage is suffering for being a Christian. And so whatever this passage in between is saying it's got to do with Peter encouraging them and us when we face unjust, undeserved suffering. Whatever he's saying, he's saying to help you suffer **well**, to stand strong and find courage to stand when your family turns against you because you're a Christian, when your friends mock you, when your career falters or your friendships fracture because Jesus Christ is the most important thing to you. And you would rather lose them than Him. And Peter starts with Christ's suffering and he ends with Christ's glorious conquering power in his resurrection and ascension and reign, and in between there's the confusing bit.

But his aim is clear: God's purposes and His final victory are being worked out and you're a part of that, you're on the winning side. So don't quit.

Christ Also Suffered

V18. 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.'

Now what you've got to remember is that the Peter who writes that is the very same Peter who when Jesus told him that He, Jesus, was going to suffer and die at the hands of the religious leaders, Peter took Jesus aside and told him 'no... that's not going to happen'. Peter saw no place for a Messiah suffering and dying. That wasn't in Peter's game plan. But 20 years later, here is Peter, having been an eyewitness of the suffering and death of Christ saying He suffered and died and He did that for you and for me. Now Christ's death isn't something Peter's ashamed of. It's something he glories in.

And in one verse Peter gives us one of the most profound and wonderful explanations of what God achieved in the cross. He may have been just a fisherman, he may not have had the intellectual brain-power of Paul, but in just one verse Peter tells us the glory of the gospel of Jesus.

1. And he says 'For Christ *also* suffered'. You've got a Saviour, Peter says, who knows what it is to suffer unjustly. You're not coming to a saviour who doesn't understand. Now, when someone goes through something bad, some terrible experience, or faces some loss and they go and see a counselor or a doctor or whatever, the counselor can have lots of fine words, right words, good words, but to the one who is suffering it all sounds hollow, because they've never experienced it, they haven't stood in their shoes. They may have learnt this stuff from a book, it may be right, but they've never felt the pain of it in their heart. They've not been where the sufferer has been. Well the New Testament makes much of the fact that Christ has been where you are. He is, the writer to the Hebrews tells us, the Great High Priest who is able to sympathise with us in our trials. Christ has *also* suffered. He knows what you know. He has felt what you feel. And when you walk that path, Peter says, you're not cutting a new trail, you're walking in the footsteps of Jesus. That is why Corrie ten Boom, who knew the horrors of the Nazi concentration camp and endured the loss of so many family members, could say: there is no pit so deep- no suffering, no trial I could face, no loss I could go through - but Christ's love is not deeper still. Christ also suffered Peter says. He knows what you know.

2. And then Peter says 'For Christ also suffered *once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous*.' That's what we call the substitutionary atonement. Big words, even greater power. You see, on the surface it might have looked as though Jesus was executed because the Romans and the religious leaders wanted to get rid of him: He was a trouble-maker. But the Bible tells us that Christ's death was by the express will and intent of God. Christ came to die. He came to take upon himself the punishment that we deserve for the wrong we do. He dies in our place as our substitute. The righteous for the unrighteous. And that means that when you put

your faith in Christ and trust Him as having died for you, you don't have to suffer and die for your sins. You deserve to. But you don't have to. He's borne the wrath of God for you. He's done it and He's done it *once and for all* Peter tells us.

Now why does Peter write that when he's trying to encourage us to endure in the face of suffering? Well, it's this: when you go through trials and there seems no way out, things don't seem to be getting any better, you can begin to think: Is God punishing me? Is this stuff that's going on in my life because God is judging me? Have I got sick, have I got cancer because of my sin? Listen, all suffering, ultimately, is as a result of sin: all our sin, the collective sin of mankind in rebellion against God. But *Christ* has suffered for your sin, once and for all. It's done. It's over with. The price of your sin has been paid. There is no debt left to pay. It's over. So, you don't have to appease Him, you don't have to do penance or go to purgatory. He has paid the price for your sin. So when this little voice whispers in your ear: 'what you're going through right now, you deserve this. God doesn't love you. He's punishing you.' Well, you can go to this verse and say 'oh I deserve far worse than this. But Christ has paid it all.'

3. 'For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, *that he might bring us to God.*' Now if you're not yet a Christian, your greatest problem is not your husband, or your wife, or your job or your finances or whatever else presses in on you. Your greatest problem is your alienation from God. But in the cross, Christ solves your greatest problem. Once you were a million miles from God, alienated from the people of God. But in the cross, Christ takes away everything that stood between you and God and brings you near to him.

The problem is, when you *are* a Christian and go through suffering and your world is falling apart, you can feel a million miles from God all over again. And that same voice can whisper in your ear: 'God has forsaken you. He has turned His back on you. He doesn't care about you. Maybe there isn't even a God.' And Peter says 'No! You have been brought near to God.' When Christ cried out 'my God, my God why have you forsaken me?' He did so, so that you need never cry that prayer. He was alienated so you will never be alienated. He was separated from God so that you might be brought near to God. He was cut off from God so that you might be reconciled to God. And when you face trials and difficulties, you can say 'God may have willed this, but not in anger. Far from this being a sign that He has turned His back on me, if He has allowed me to go through this then it is His loving fatherly discipline, for my good. He's not a million miles away. He's my loving father and I am by His side.'

4. The fourth thing Peter says of Christ is that he was *put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit.* Now whether what Peter has in mind here is Christ's resurrection in the power of the Spirit, or His entering the realm of the spiritual world after his death and before His resurrection, doesn't matter. The point is that death was not the end. Death did not and does not have the last word. To all appearances when Christ died, the enemy had won. To anyone looking on, the cross was a monumental defeat. The leaders were jeering, the crowd was mocking, Satan was laughing. But that wasn't the end. He was put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit. Christ has been vindicated. And just as it was

for these first century Christians, so for us: we may not see victory this side of glory. Things may not work out the way you hope, this side of eternity. To anyone looking on from the outside, when you get mocked, or your family turn against you, or your career stalls because you're a Christian, or you quit something because you know it's wrong and you pay the price of that decision, to those on the outside it seems like you're the loser, just like it seemed Christ was the loser. Listen, Christ was no loser, and you are no loser if you entrust yourself to the one who conquered death. You will be vindicated just as He was.

Noah Endured

Peter uses Jesus being made alive in the spirit as a spring board into one of the most perplexing passages in the Bible, v19: 'Christ... being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which (in the Spirit, or in the realm of the spirit) 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.'

Now what is Peter talking about there? Who are these *spirits* Jesus was preaching to, and what's this *prison* they're in and what's that got to do with Noah? And I really think Peter should drink some of his own medicine because in Peter's second letter, 2 Peter, Peter says that in Paul's letters 'there are some things in them that are hard to understand.' And people in glasshouses shouldn't throw stones! Martin Luther, the great reformer (never a man given to false modesty) said of this passage: "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!" Now if Martin Luther didn't have a clue, what chance does this Martin stand! And while I have no doubt that when Peter wrote this his readers would have said 'that's a great point Peter, that really helped me' it's not so easy now!

According to Karen Jobes' commentary there are 180 different theories as to where Christ preached, who He preached to, when He preached to them and what it was He preached. Well, I'm going to give you three possible explanations. And you can choose which one you think best fits. Whichever you choose you've got to keep in mind that Peter's great objective here is to encourage them as they face unjust suffering.

Version 1. This was the view held by Tertullian and John Calvin. And it says that after Christ died and before His resurrection, Christ went to Hades, the prison, the holding place for the dead, and proclaimed there His victory over sin and death to the spirits of the dead. To those who refused to bend the knee to God, like those killed in the flood, it was their final condemnation but for all those Old Testament saints who died in faith, this was the moment they had been waiting for and Christ took them in a train of triumph, into heaven, now forever opened to those who put their trust in Christ. And that might be what it means and if it does it means Jesus Christ is Lord of life and death and heaven and hell and He has secured the final victory and heaven is opened and if you die in faith, you will be with Him in paradise.

Version 2. Has it that the spirits in prison that Peter refers to are the so-called sons of God, the fallen angels of Genesis 6, who rebelled against God and married human women, and as a consequence the sin on the face of the earth piled up to the extent that God said he would blot it all out in the flood. And these angelic spirits have been kept in chains in hell waiting for judgment. And support for this comes from 2 Peter 2:4: 'For... God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains in gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment.' And when Christ died on the cross, forever securing forgiveness of sin and forever breaking the power of satan, He descended into Hell and there proclaimed His triumph and eternal victory over evil and the eternal condemnation of satan and his demons, these spirits kept in chains. And if that is what Peter meant then it tells anyone who suffers that though you may feel at the mercy of the powers of darkness, you're not. Christ has triumphed over every power.

Now, I think those two versions are great and I would combine them into one great doctrine of Christ's glorious triumph over sin and death and evil and His glorious entry into heaven. But as things stand today, I think **version 3** best explains what Peter is saying here. And it's a slightly modified version of what Augustine taught. And that is that when Peter says Christ went in the spirit to preach, it was Christ preaching through Noah. It wasn't Christ in person preaching. It was Noah, inspired by the Holy Spirit who was the preacher. In 1 Peter 1:10-11 Peter says of the Old Testament prophets: 'Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and enquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating.' So already in Peter's mind and in his readers' minds is the understanding that the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit, was active in and through his Old Testament preachers. Then in 2 Peter 2:5 Peter describes Noah as a herald, a preacher, a proclaimer of righteousness.

And the people Noah preached to were the people living at Noah's time, who were alive back then, but who were killed in the flood and whose spirits are now in prison, in Hades, and when they were alive and still had a chance Noah warned them of the coming judgment and urged them to repent and turn to God.

Now, if that's the case, why does Peter mention it now? I mean, what encouragement is *Noah* and his arky-arky when you're suffering unjustly? Firstly, just like these first century Christians, Noah knew what it was to feel isolated and in a minority – just 7 others- with the whole world opposed to him. And maybe you know what that feels like. You think you're on your own and the whole world thinks your mad, building a giant boat in the middle of the desert, believing in Christ in the 21st century. And Peter's saying, 'Numbers have got nothing to do with it'. Don't ever think that just because everyone else lives this way they're right. The fact that everyone else is doing it, young people, has got nothing to do with it. These 8 people: Mr and Mrs Noah and their sons and daughters-in-law, get saved. Everyone else faces eternal imprisonment and hell. Sometimes it's good to swim against the tide. I bet there were days Noah wished he could be like everyone else and scrap this ark-building thing. The day it started raining, those

thoughts disappeared. But when you are going through trials you can feel lonely and isolated. And that's when you need the support of your church family, so if you're not yet in a homegroup, get in one.

Secondly, Noah's an encouragement because whilst Noah was building the ark, over 120 years, it must have felt at times as though it would *never* rain. And Peter tells them, that wasn't a sign of God's indifference, or God reneging on His word, that was God's patience. And when you are going through the mill, and things aren't working out, your natural cry is 'how long O Lord?' and you begin to wonder whether God will ever fulfill His promises. When that's the case, God's not indifferent, He's just patient.

Thirdly, Noah's an encouragement because Christ was with Noah, speaking through Noah, even when people ignored him. And Christ is with you, even when people aren't listening.

Baptism: an appeal to God

Peter makes his final jump. He's encouraged them in the cross, he's encouraged them in Noah, then he uses the waters of the flood to link to the water of baptism. V21: 'Baptism, which corresponds to this- corresponds to Noah and his family being saved through the waters of the flood – now saves you.' Now does Peter really mean that? I mean, is Peter teaching baptismal regeneration, that people get saved by being baptized? Because if he does, that would contradict the rest of the New Testament. Because when he says 'baptism now saves you', it sounds suspiciously like, 'baptism now saves you'!

And the answer is no. He's already said in v18 that it is Christ who brings us to God. Then he says in v21 that baptism saving us isn't about the external stuff, not as a removal of dirt from the body, not as a ceremony or ritual, but as an appeal to God for a clean conscience. It's the outward physical expression of this plea to God to save us in Christ and to wash us clean, and it's the pledge to God that we have taken our decision for Christ. And then Peter says it is *through* the resurrection of Jesus Christ. So when you get baptized, you are demonstrating physically what God has done for you spiritually: baptised into Christ's death and lifted up into His resurrection.

And when you face tough times and you consider throwing in the towel, you can look back to your baptism and say 'that is physical evidence of what God has done in my life'. It's the marker in the ground that says, I have been made alive in Christ and nothing can be done to me that will separate me from Him. And if you haven't been baptized, we're going to be offering that once it's a bit warmer, come and see me and get baptized. Make that declaration of what Christ has done for you.

And Peter finishes in v22, by saying that Christ has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been made subject to Him. When you suffer for doing what's *right* it's the evidence that you are on Christ's side, the winning side. All authority and power is His and nothing can touch you that Christ doesn't allow.