Jesus Our Model In Suffering
1 Peter 3:18-22

Introduction

The opening verses of chapter 3 focus on the conduct of believers (vv.1-17); now Peter will focus on the Lord Jesus who is Christ to the believers (vv.18-22). The chapter began with a description of submission in the home (vv.1-7); submission under suffering (vv.8-14); and will now focus on our subjection to Christ (vv.15-22). Peter gives a description of four things accomplished in the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. The death of Jesus (v.18); his journey to the spirit world (v.19-20); his resurrection (v.21); his ascension and exaltation (v.22). Verse 15 provides the context; “but sanctify the Lord God in your hearts” and always be ready to give an answer to all men concerning the hope inside you.”

Peter is making a simple but powerful point; we are to expect unjust suffering; the unjust suffering by believers began with the unjust suffering of Jesus. The unjust suffering of Jesus brought triumph over sin, victory over death and the conquest of Satan. At the core, at the very center of the gospel is the key concept that Jesus the righteous, died for those who were unrighteous. The victory of Jesus, the triumph of Jesus through undeserved suffering has brought redemption for fallen human beings. In the sacrifice of Jesus evil men were able to do what evil men want to do; get rid of Jesus; and God was able to do what God wanted to do; save sinners. In the suffering of believers; we are to have hope and comfort; that our suffering will accomplish the purpose of God.

Suffering rarely seems fair—at least from the perspective of the person enduring the pain. Peter invites the reader to consider God’s perspective. Remember Peter has already written; “For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong” (v.17). Unjust suffering is better that deserved punishment. Jesus didn’t deserve to die. Yet the suffering of Jesus justifies the sinner and purifies the saint.

I read the story many years ago about a large American shoe manufacturer who sent two sales representatives out to different parts of the Australian outback to see if they could drum up some business among the aborigines. Some time later the company received telegrams from both agents. The first one said, “No business here. Natives don’t wear shoes. The second one said, “Great opportunity here—natives don’t wear shoes.”

We don’t have to beat the bushes to drum up business for suffering. Jesus told us to expect suffering (John 15:19-20). The writer of Hebrews told us to expect suffering (Heb.12:9-10); and Paul wrote;

2 Timothy 3:12 (NKJV) Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.

Jesus Bears Our Sin (v.18)
Jesus Our Model In Suffering
1 Peter 3:18-22

1 Peter 3:18 (NKJV) For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit,

Imagine Peter is speaking to his children. The child asks the question; “Why did Jesus have to die?” Peter’s simple answer; “that He might bring us to God”.

Some Bible scholars believe verse 18 was an ancient hymn sung in the early church or an early liturgy repeated over and over again. Some Greek manuscripts have the word “suffered” coming from the word pascho which connects the phrase even more to the previous verse (17). Other manuscripts have apothenisko (died). Whatever phrase is more likely the net result remains the same; Jesus died for sins. Jesus paid the penalty for sins. The righteous (Jesus) for the unrighteous (everyone). The word righteous is singular (the righteous one); the word unrighteous is plural. Jesus suffered (died) once for all sins. The sacrifice of Jesus has a complete, sufficient effect. Let me try to be more clear. The sacrifice of Jesus is a sufficient and complete sacrifice for sin. No one else will have to die for sins. Jesus died once for sins. The word translated once (hapax) means once in time and space; we might think “once for all time”.

Jesus was put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit. The phrase translates the Greek term pneumati which may refer to the Holy Spirit or to Christ’s divine spirit; in contrast to his human flesh or ‘body’ (NIV). Bible teachers and scholars are divided whether ‘spirit’ should be in capitols in reference to the Holy Spirit or small caps in reference to his human spirit; part of the the answer depends on whether the preposition is to be understood as “in” or “by”--since both make sense depending on the context (see Life Application Commentary; p.101). If the reference is to the Lord’s own spirit; Jesus was sinless, and once the penalty for sin was paid for our sin; death no longer had any more claim upon Him. It was not even able to corrupt His body in the Tomb (Acts 2:27; Psalm 16:10).

Clearly the Holy Spirit was involved in all aspects of the earthly ministry of Jesus; the Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary at His conception (Matt.3:16-17; Luke 4:18-19). The Lord Jesus offered Himself without spot (flaw) unto God in His death “through the eternal Spirit (Heb.9:14). Jesus was raised by the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom.8:11).

Jesus Speaks A Timeless Message (vv.19-20)

1 Peter 3:19 (NKJV) by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison,

We are faced with a problem. Who or what are these “spirits” in prison (phylake; a cage)? Once again language compounds the problem. The word translated spirits (pneumata) can mean human spirits, angelic spirits or demonic spirits. Who are these “spirits”? When did Christ make this proclamation? What was the content of his message or proclamation?
Jesus Our Model In Suffering
1 Peter 3:18-22

1 Peter 3:20 (NKJV) who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water.

Peter identifies them as those “who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah”.

Thanks Peter.

As you can imagine scholars over the centuries have come up with many different interpretations. Richard DeHaan wrote a book Good News For Bad Times. He lists four main theories to explain this passage. The main interpretations include;

1. The first explanation suggests these are the human beings alive before Noah’s flood. When God told Noah he would visit judgment on the earth and destroy the world by water; God ordered Noah to build an Ark. Noah and his sons built that Ark over the course of 120 years. According to this explanation Jesus preached though Noah and by the Holy Spirit to the men and women to repent of their sin and escape judgment by joining the family in the Ark of God. But why are these spirits in prison? And what did Christ “preach”?

2. The second suggestion is that the spirits in prison are a group of beings who were neither angel or human but rather the offspring of the illicit union of angelic creatures who produced offspring from human beings based on Genesis 6. The “son’s of God” who saw the daughter’s of men (Gen.6:1-2). Those who embrace this position suggest that when Jesus died he descended into hades (here the place of both the righteous and the unrighteous dead) and announced to these imprisoned spirits that he had paid the price for sin. Objections to the view include that the purpose of the preaching is not given; and in order to embrace this view you must interpret Genesis 6 to mean angelic beings had relations with human beings and produced a race of being that was neither completely human or angel.

3. The third explanation is that these are the spirits of wicked angels of Noah’s day who engaged in some monstrous evil; but what that evil was probably did not include marriage with human beings. The people who hold this view believe the Son’s of God in Genesis 6 are a reference to fallen angels who entered into and possessed the bodies of human beings; or possessed the bodies of violent men. These men in turn gave birth to other people who were wicked, evil; a reference to the Nephilim (or Giants). Bible teachers and scholars who offer this interpretation see the “spirits in prison” as the sinning angels of Genesis and believe they are the same ones Peter references in 2 Peter 2:4 as “delivered. . .into the chains of darkness”. The purpose they suggest of Jesus entering hades (or the nether region) was to tell this special group of wicked angels that their doom was certain; their punishment certain. That Jesus paid the price for sin and would soon demonstrate that He was indeed their Master and Lord by rising from the dead. This interpretation is only possible if in fact Genesis 6 teaches that these were fallen angels who possessed the bodies of pre-flood humans for the purpose of polluting and deceiving the human race.
4. The fourth explanation is that these are wicked beings and Old Testament believers. Those who embrace this view suggest Jesus descended to Hades between his death and resurrection to make an announcement to all wicked spirits and to release the Old Testament Saints who were contained in the place of the righteous dead; a compartment some refer to as Abraham’s bosom. They suggest that when Paul writes that Jesus “descended first into the lower parts of the earth” and “led captivity captive” (Eph. 4:8-10); that Paul confirms what Peter preached. According the people who embrace this view they see a dual purpose in Christ’s descent into the lower regions. They say he first announces to fallen angels that Jesus has conquered sin and paid the penalty for sin; then suggesting or contending that the believers prior to the death and resurrection of Jesus were not fully forgiven until Christ had presented His sacrifice; they maintain that Jesus takes these Saints immediately after His death into Heaven. This view can only be held if you are convinced of the “compartment” theory of hades as Biblical; and that Old Testament Saints were denied access to Heaven until Jesus died on the Cross.

So which is it? Who are the spirits in prison? Human beings in the nether world? Angelic beings in the nether world? A mongrel race of beings neither human or angel or mixture of both? What was the message? “I died for sin and death is now defeated?” Are people given a second chance of salvation in the nether world? Whatever else the meaning; the Bible does not teach that people are given an opportunity to be saved in this world and the next world (i.e. Mormons etc). We are hard pressed to come up with an exact identification of who the spirits in prison might be. The mention of Noah lends strong credibility that they are likely either human beings who rejected Noah’s message; or supernatural creatures somehow connected to the judgment that resulted in the entire planet being wiped out; where only eight souls were saved.

Some Bible passages are difficult. Sometimes we must say; “I don’t know what this means”. Whatever else it means there are principles that we can apply to unclear texts. The first rule; evaluate the unclear by what is clear.

Peter points out that those who perished were destroyed by water. Those who were saved were saved through the water. The Greek word *dia* can mean “through” or “by” depending on the context. It could have a double meaning; the waters destroyed the wicked; but the waters sustained the Ark; or made it possible for the Ark to survive in the flood.

If the context is suffering, and surviving suffering is the point; than the thing the devil means to use to destroy us can become the instrument of our maturation. If the context is salvation than the waters that God used to judge the evil doers; were the same waters that allowed Noah and his family to safely navigate through the storm.

**Jesus Rose From The Dead (v.21)**
To what baptism is Peter referencing? Is this water baptism? I think Peter is saying, “this water symbolizes baptism”.

The phrase “antitype” (NKJV) or “corresponds” (ESV) translates the Greek word antitupon- used in Greek to refer to one thing representing another thing; or symbol or that which is prefigured. The word can refer to a person, or a place, or an event or an object or an act that anticipates or foreshadows a more perfect fulfillment of the essential idea (again see Life Application Bible Commentary; p. 105).

What is baptism? It can mean a transference; from one state to another. The flood came as God’s judgment on human wickedness. But for Noah and his family the flood meant deliverance from the wicked mockings and trials and persecutions. Human existence is often defined by pre-flood humanity and post flood humanity. In Baptism believers identify with Jesus. We are separated from the lost and now placed into the category of the found.

Baptism is the sign that identifies us with the new covenant. Does the ceremony of Baptism save us? No. The ceremony of Baptism is a sign and a seal.

Chuck Swindoll writes;

“The act of baptism doesn’t save us, it just symbolizes the salvation that has already taken place. Peter himself clearly states that those baptismal waters in no way cleanse the flesh--either literally or figuratively--but they do give us a good conscience toward God” (see p. 81; Hope In Hurtful Times; A Study of 1 Peter; Charles R. Swindoll).

The water of Baptism does not literally wash away sin. Water on the outside cannot cleanse sin on the inside. Baptism is a symbol; it represents what salvation does; the act of baptism does not save and cleanse; the power to save comes from the death of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus.

Peter explains “the baptism that now saves you” results from a pledge the pledge of a good conscience toward God. The pledge (eperotema) was a technical term for the signing of a contract or the entering into of a contract or covenant. The Holy Spirit convicts of sin; calling on the sinner to change their mind and their attitude about sin and about Jesus; the Holy Spirit calls for a pledge of faith. The inward pledge is indicated by an outward sign.
Jesus Our Model In Suffering
1 Peter 3:18-22

At wedding ceremonies a couple make pledges, promises; and as a sign that they will fulfill those pledges and promises they wear a ring. The wearing of the ring does not make you married; and the absence of a ring does not make you single. The promise makes you married.

Peter is writing to a group of pressured and suffering Christians who received promises from Jesus and made promises to Jesus. Public baptism would in part keep them from the temptation to renounce Jesus and abandon faith. Public baptism was meant to confirm loyalty and to identify with Jesus in his life and in his death and in his resurrection.

I believe Baptism is a physical moment that reflects a spiritual commitment. What transaction takes place at Baptism? Does the sinner become a saint? No--the sinner becomes a saint when the sinner takes the pledge offered by God’s Holy Spirit.

Think for a moment. Noah and his family were saved “by water”. Clearly the water would have destroyed Noah and his family if it were not for the Ark. The flood which wiped out land life on the earth; became the intermediary means of deliverance when it lifted the Ark on the surface of the water. The scene of safety in the midst of judgment is portrayed by baptism (Wilmington’s Guide to the Bible; p.503).

The water represents judgment and death; made the Ark float; so it’s occupants would not be destroyed. So we too--when we enter into the Ark--Jesus--we find deliverance from wrath. We are safe in God’s Ark that is Christ. The death of Jesus on the cross; Jesus bore God’s judgment against sin, and by faith in Him we are brought to safety. When we are baptized we identify that Jesus rescues us from condemnation and death. The cleansing agent is not the Baptism; it is Christ. Baptism is rather “the answer of a good conscience toward God”. The Greek word translated answer is eperotema which means ‘question’ or ‘appeal’ or ‘pledge’. I am going to suggest that pledge best fits the context; for baptism is a pledge or a declaration by the Christian to go on public record, to walk in newness of life; the pledge comes from a clear conscience; that is Jesus has given us a clear conscience; he has really forgiven our sins; we are now longer a foreign sinner; we are freed from guilt though his ‘by -faith’ union’ with Jesus Christ (See Wilmington’s Guide to the Bible p.503).

Jesus Remains Exalted In Heaven (v.22)

1 Peter 3:22 (NKJV) who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him.

Conclusion

How are we to think about this passage?

When suffering comes and pain remains
Our precious Savior’s love sustains
Jesus Our Model In Suffering
1 Peter 3:18-22

The absence of pleasure and presence of loss
Our thoughts and attention turn to the cross

And unjust suffering digs deep in our souls
And doubts and depression begin to unfold
The fear of death that threatens our peace
And we pray and we beg for blessed release

Remember the pain that Jesus sustained
And the blessing of life his death has obtained
The fact of his death and unoccupied grave
Is lingering proof that men can be saved.

When unjust suffering seems unbearable remember the cross
When the fear of death steals your peace, remember the resurrection.