

First Peter: Victory Proclamation

1 Peter 3:18-22

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We come now, in 1 Peter 3, to what is widely recognized as one of the most difficult texts in the NT. *It's a passage which has generated numerous differing interpretations. The idea of Christ descending into hell, after his death, has been supported from this text.* The idea that – maybe – the dead get a second chance to hear the gospel, has been seen here. The idea that (the pre-incarnate) Christ himself preached in the days of Noah, is another interpretation. There is also an obviously important, yet difficult, reference to Christian baptism. One commentator says that given the various challenges in the text, given its complexity, there are about 180 possible combinations or choices any interpreter faces.

That being said: do not lose heart. We are not here to solve all these issues, we are here to listen to the Word of God, and the main point of this passage is clear enough, and indeed, it is very important to the scattered exiles, then and now. With that, we will make three points: The victory (18 & 22), the proclamation (19 & 20), and baptism (21).

I. The Victory

First, then, the victory. Peter had concluded the previous passage by saying it is better to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. Here, he is going to show us why this is the case. He has already spoken of Christ's unjust suffering on the cross. And, indeed, our blessing, is rooted in the imitation of Christ, and participation in his sufferings. And he begins here by returning to the center, that is, to the cross. Verse 18: For Christ also suffered once for sins.

Jesus' suffering is not merely the suffering of an innocent victim – though it is that – he suffered once (once and for all time) – he suffered FOR sins. His death is vicarious, meaning he takes our place, he is our substitute. All of that is packed into the little word “for.” Christ suffered “for” sins. The righteous FOR the unrighteous. The substitution here is total. We are unclean, guilty, accursed, unrighteous. And Christ, holy, innocent, the Righteous One, bears the curse for us.

This is atonement. And if you reject this atonement, you will have other scapegoats and other victims, in an endless attempt to wipe away guilt, which, without this cross, will always remain and resurface. Peter said earlier in this chapter, that, Christ suffered for us, SO THAT we might die to sin and live to righteousness. Here he says: Christ died for us...to bring us to God. It doesn't get simpler than that. Why did Christ die? To bring you – who were alienated, who were without God in the world – to God. Communion with the Triune God is the reason – not one reason among others – not a means to an end - the reason for, the goal of, then end of, the atoning work of Christ. (Heaven 50 to 0)

This work of Christ is further described when Peter says: He was put to death in the flesh but made alive in the Spirit. This does not refer to two PARTS of Christ, like his body and his spirit. This refers to two orders of existence. Christ dies in this age, or in the realm of the flesh, and Christ is raised in the power of the age to come, in the realm of the Spirit. This is simply a reference to Christ's death, and to his resurrection in the power of the Spirit. (Communion w/ Triune God: requires resurrection)

Now, I want to jump ahead, just to point out the overall flow of the text – so that we don't get too bogged down in the difficult middle section. So, let us note this: Peter, who has set the cross of Christ before us vividly, now stresses the resurrection as the sequel to the cross. He was made alive (raised) in the Spirit.

And then, after mentioning the resurrection again at the end of v.21, says, in v.22: he has gone into heaven, and is at God's right hand – with angels, authorities, and powers in submission to him. A clear reference to the ascension of Christ, and his enthronement over all the powers. So, the text is about Christ's death, his resurrection, and his ascension to the right hand of God. Thus, it is about Christ's triumph (to bring us to God, to bring many sons to glory). This is important to suffering and afflicted and harassed/beleaguered Christians. And Peter – remember – is encouraging Christians oppressed by the powers.

Christ, who was reviled without reviling in return, Christ, who refused to retaliate, who refused to threaten, Christ, who submitted to the powers that be, is now exalted, with all the powers in submission to him. And thus, Christians in their suffering, in their being drawn into the mystery of the cross, even in their martyrdom, are already participating – in/by that very suffering – in the victory of his resurrection and ascension. The Christ we are united to, is exalted. That's the dominant message of this passage. He died to bring us to God. Thus, we are to follow, and we shall follow, in his footsteps. From cross to crown. From weakness to glory. His humiliation teaches us the way of non-retaliation, the way meekness, his exaltation gives us courage and grounds our hope of heavenly glory. Christ is triumphant, and Peter's flock – and all the suffering, socially marginalized saints – do and shall share his victory. That's the (cruciform) victory.

II. The Proclamation

Our second point is the proclamation. And now comes the fun part. Verse 19: And being made alive (in the Spirit, or “in which,” meaning, in the Spirit), he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits. Spirits who seem to date back to the time of Noah.

Now, the fact that some sort of proclamation is being made by Christ, is beyond dispute. But here are all the big questions: When did this happen? Where did this happen? To whom did Jesus make this proclamation? And what did he proclaim? Let’s take them one at a time (and quickly).

When? After his resurrection, at the time of his ascension. The text demands this to be the time of the proclamation. Where? In the realm of the spirit. For Christ is addressing imprisoned spirits. So, in the place the principalities and powers dwell, the proclamation is made. To whom does Jesus make proclamation? Spirits who were disobedient during the days of Noah. Long ago, when God waited patiently, while the ark was being built. You might ask why these beings (we will get to that), but it’s pretty clear that that is who is being addressed. What does Christ proclaim to them? His victory. The text is about his victory, as v. 22 makes clear. His victory is an announcement of their doom. Not only their doom, but the final doom of all the angels and authorities and powers, which are already subjected to the ascended Christ.

Now one might ask: but why the spirits on Noah’s day? And the reason appears to be, that Peter thinks, that Christians live in a time similar to Noah, building the ark, and waiting for the cataclysmic judgment to fall. We heard Jesus, in the gospel lesson, say: ²⁶ “Just as it was in the days of Noah, so also will it be in the days of the Son of Man. ²⁷ People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark. Then the flood came and destroyed them all.

And one thing is clear in this letter. Peter thinks the end of all things is at hand. That judgment is about to begin – 2 Peter 3 makes it very clear that the world of Noah was destroyed by water, and that the present heavens and earth will be destroyed by fire.

So, Noah is a picture of the church, Peter says. In the ark Noah built, the text says: only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water (sifting judgment ordeal where, one is either drowned by it or saved through it). Peter’s flock is few in number as well. But they will certainly be saved, through the coming fiery judgment ordeal. Noah, and Peter’s readers, are both beleaguered minorities, both called to witness to the patience and the coming judgment of God, which was, and which is, soon to fall. It is at hand. Listen to Peter pull a bunch of these themes together in 2 Peter 2:

For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, putting them in chains of darkness to be held for judgment... “ *if he did not spare the ancient world when he brought the flood on its ungodly people, but protected Noah, a preacher of righteousness, and seven others...*” if this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to hold the unrighteous for punishment on the day of judgment.

This is why the victory proclamation is to the spirits from the day of Noah, now imprisoned, or restrained by God, for the day of judgment. That judgment day has arrived in the ascension, in the victory procession of Christ over all the powers. Their doom means the doom of all the evil powers. And it means the final vindication of the suffering church.

So just to be clear. There is no descent into the underworld here. Where Christ is preaching in hell – though that has been popular historically. Nor is there some sort of second chance for the dead to get the gospel proclaimed to them – though that has had its advocates. This is the preaching, the victory proclamation, of the risen and ascending Christ, to the defeated powers. That’s the proclamation.

III. Baptism

Our third point then is baptism. Noah’s household was saved through the water, and this water symbolizes baptism, the text says. The Noahic flood is a type, a picture, a foreshadowing, of Christian baptism. The waters of Christian baptism are like the waters of the flood. When received, and responded to in faith, they are healing waters. But if one rejects the preaching (first of Noah, then of the gospel of Christ) then the waters become a deluge of judgment.

What the flood pictured, or pre-figured, what the flood was a type of, baptism is: namely an eschatological judgment ordeal. The future judgment day is brought to bear on the person baptized. That is why baptism saves NOT through a removal of dirt from the body, but by an oath, or a pledge, of a clear conscience toward God. The ritual of baptism does not save you. Even the initial washing does not save. Baptism places a person under an oath. It is a pledge, a promise, to live with a clear, sprinkled conscience before God.

This is why baptism needs to be publicly renewed in the Supper. Baptism is a pledge, and that pledge must be owned and fulfilled. Thus, people come to the Supper to fulfill their baptismal oath, to have their conscience toward God sprinkled with the blood of Christ. To manifest what they have pledged (Sealed with) – a clear conscience. The waters of baptism are designed by God to drown, to destroy, to judge, to conquer all our enemies. Sin, death, and the powers arrayed against us.

But again, just to be clear, when we say baptism now saves, but we don't mean in abstraction from Jesus Christ. This whole passage is about our union with Jesus in his death, his resurrection, and his ascension. Which, of course, can never be separated from each other.

So, Peter concludes: that baptism saves you BY the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Peter has already said in chapter 1: that we were born again (that's baptismal language) through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. And here he reiterates the point: Baptism joins you to the crucified and risen Christ. That is why it saves. Jesus has undergone the great eschatological judgment ordeal on the cross. All hell. All the fire of the coming wrath, of the coming judgment, all the forces of spiritual darkness, were loosed on him. A flood of evil, a deluge of judgment. And he has prevailed. He has been raised in triumph. And he has proclaimed that triumph to the powers, and has ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of glory, with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him. And baptism joins you to THAT victory, and pledges, binds you by an oath, to live out that union with Christ with a clear conscience toward God.

Let's, in closing, very briefly look at how this advances Peter argument in the letter so far. Christians are aliens, sojourners, exiles with a heavenly inheritance. And Peter expects suffering. He fixes the church's hope on the future coming of Christ. He exhorts to patient submission, in imitation of the master's cross. He exhorts to non-violent suffering and waiting. But here he reminds them – and us – that Christ is risen, victorious over the powers and ascended into heaven. And he calls them – and us – to remember that their baptism, like the waters of Noah, pledges final vindication of God's little, scattered flock. And so, we, who lack any earthly power, and who, in any event, do not use earthy weapons, and do not wrestle with flesh and blood.

So, we bear witness, we live out our baptismal oath, we confess the faith, knowing that, like the preaching of Noah, it is a sign of the coming doom of all the already defeated demonic hosts. For Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ has ascended, and proclaimed his triumph. Christ is seated at God's right hand, with angels, authorities, and powers in submission to him. And you are joined to – in all your distress, suffering, weakness, darkness, and doubt, all of your social and political upheaval and impotence – you are joined to this Lord of glory and to his cosmic victory. Praise be to God. Amen.

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