

## STUDY ON THE BOOK OF FIRST PETER

### GODLINESS IN SUFFERING II

Read 1 Peter 3:18-22

#### **Introduction.**

To catch on to what this paragraph is all about, we need to see how it relates to what goes before and what comes after. Just before, in verse 17 Peter calls Christians to suffer if that is God's will for them: *"For it is better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil."* Sometimes, it is God's will that we suffer for doing what is right. This is not an easy thing to hear. We need help with this. We need understanding and we need encouragement and hope, if God is going to will that we suffer for doing what is right.

So, in verse 18 Peter begins this paragraph by saying, *"For Christ also died [suffered] for sins once for all . . ."* The word "for" shows us that Peter is beginning to explain why it is sometimes God's will for us to suffer for doing what is right. So, the paragraph begins as an explanation or a reason for the call to suffer as a Christian for doing what is right.

Then look at the connection between this paragraph (vv18-22) and what follows in 4:1. The next unit begins, *"Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same purpose"*—that is, the purpose to suffer for doing what is right, like Christ did. So just before the text (in 3:17) and just after the text (in 4:1) the point is: get ready to suffer for doing what it right, if that should be God's will. Arm yourselves with that purpose.

#### **The Righteous Dying for the Unrighteous**

*"For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust that He might bring us to God..." (v18a)*

As Peter gives us the example of Jesus' righteousness as a model for our own, we learn some important lessons about the redemptive power of Jesus suffering for us. Jesus suffered once for sins. There is no longer any sacrifice or atonement that can please God other than what Jesus provided at the cross. Even our own suffering won't pay for our sins. The price has already been paid.

Though Peter used the suffering of Christ as an encouragement and strength to his afflicted readers, we must remember that Peter also set Jesus completely apart from all others in his suffering. It is almost as if the apostle said, 'You have none of you suffered when compared with him;' or, at least, he was the Arch-Sufferer, — the Prince of sufferers, — the Emperor of the realm of agony, — Lord Paramount in sorrow... You know a little about grief, but you do not know much. The hem of grief's garment is all you ever touch, but Christ wore it as his daily robe. We do but sip of the cup but he drank to its bitterest dregs.

#### **The Just for the unjust**

Jesus is a perfect example of suffering for doing good. He, the just, suffered for all of us who are the unjust — and the purpose of it all was to bring us to God, to restore our broken and dead relationship with Him. Since Jesus did all this to bring us to God, how wrong it is for us to not come to God in fellowship! The ancient Greek word translated "bring" is the same word used for access in Romans 5:2 and Ephesians 2:18. In ancient literature, the word bring was used "of admission to an audience with the Great King."

How do we apply that word “bring”? It means to be reconciled to God (Ephesians 2:16), to have access to the Father (Ephesians 2:17), to approach the throne of grace with confidence (Hebrews 4:16), to be purified from sin so we can approach God (Hebrews 10:22), to have peace with God (Romans 5:1; Colossians 1:20).

### Preaching to the Spirits in Prison

*“... being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison 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.”* (vv18b-20)

Jesus did die in His body but was raised from the dead by the Holy Spirit. Here, the Bible tells us that the Holy Spirit raised Jesus from the dead. It also tells us that the Father raised Jesus from the dead (Romans 6:4), and it says that Jesus raised Himself from the dead (John 2:18-22). The resurrection was the work of the Triune God.

What do these verses mean? Who were these spirits in prison? Some also see a tie-in with 1 Peter 4:6. There have been a variety of explanations, and no real certainty as to the precise meaning. These are the five most common theories, showing with italics how each theory identifies “the spirits in prison”:

1. When Noah was building the ark, Christ “in spirit” was with Noah preaching repentance and righteousness through him to *unbelievers who were on the earth then* but now are “spirits in prison” (people in hell).
2. After Christ died, he went and preached to *people in hell*, offering them a second chance of salvation.
3. 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.
4. After Christ died, he proclaimed release to *people who had repented just before they died in the flood*, and led them out of their imprisonment (in Purgatory) into heaven.
5. After Christ died (or after he rose but before he ascended into heaven), he travelled to hell and proclaimed triumph over the *fallen angels* who had sinned by marrying human women before the flood.

We also don’t know exactly why Jesus preached to these imprisoned spirits. In all probability this was preaching (the proclamation of God’s message), but it was not evangelism (the proclamation of good news). Jesus preached a message of judgment and final condemnation in light of His finished work on the cross to these disobedient spirits.

- i. In doing this there was a completion in Jesus’ triumph over evil, even the evil that happened before the flood. The Bible says that even those under the earth must acknowledge Jesus’ ultimate Lordship. Here Jesus was announcing that fact: *“that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth”* (Philippians 2:10).
- ii. We do not believe that Peter said that Christ preached the gospel to those imprisoned spirits; he taught that Christ announced His triumph over evil, which was bad news for them. For Peter’s readers, however, it meant comfort and encouragement.”

Fortunately, whatever Peter is talking about is in the past tense and doesn't seem to have anything to do with us right now or in this dispensation.

### **Baptism as a Pledge**

*“There is also an antitype which now saves us—baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ...” (v21)*

Peter alludes to Noah and his family being saved in the ark "through water," which leads him to refer briefly to Christian baptism. He drew a picture with his words here. Even as Noah's salvation from the judgment of God was connected with water, so the Christian's salvation is connected with water, the water of baptism.

Noah was not saved by the world's being gradually reformed and restored to its primitive innocence, but a sentence of condemnation was pronounced, and death, burial, and resurrection ensued. Noah must go into the ark and become dead to the world; the floods must descend from heaven and rise upward from their secret fountains beneath the earth, the ark must be submerged with many waters — here was burial; and then after a time, Noah and his family must come out into a totally new world of resurrection life. The water of the flood washed away sin and wickedness and brought a new world with a fresh start before God. The water of baptism does the same thing, providing a passage from the old to the new.

### **Purpose of Immersion in Water**

At the same time Peter was careful to point out that it isn't the actual water washing of baptism that saves us, but the spiritual reality behind the immersion in water. What really saves us is the answer of a good conscience toward God, a conscience made good through the completed work of Jesus.

Now let's examine some theological implications of this verse. In what sense does baptism save us?

Baptism *does not* save us by our ability to keep a pledge to obey God. If that were the case, we would be saving ourselves and be back under the law. And we are clearly *not* under the law according to the New Testament.

*"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God -- not by works, so that no one can boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9)*

Rather, baptism *does* save us "by the resurrection of Jesus Christ," by his mighty act. In baptism by immersion, the person being baptized symbolically enacts both burial and resurrection.

*"Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life." (Romans 6:4)*

Burial is symbolized when we are dunked under the water. Resurrection is symbolized when we come up out of the water. We didn't die for our sin, Jesus did, and we identify with his death by baptism. We can't produce spiritual life either, Jesus does, and we identify with his resurrection to eternal life by baptism.

Baptism, then, saves us as being the occasion of a faith pledge in the resurrection power of Christ.

Can a person be saved without being baptized in water? Yes. It is faith in Christ, not the performance of a Christian rite, that saves us -- witness the salvation of the repentant thief on the cross (Luke 23:39-43). But in the early church, baptism normally followed immediately upon profession of faith (Acts 2:38-41; 8:36-38; 10:47-48; 16:33; 19:5; 22:16), so much so that they are spoken of together. For a Christian, when you put your trust in Jesus, the next step is to be baptized as a pledge to God of your faith in him and a witness to others that you are following Christ.

## The Glorified Christ

*“... who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him.” (v22)*

We see the completeness of Jesus' work by His exaltation to the right hand of God the Father, and the subjection of all created spirits unto Him (angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him). So though Jesus suffered for doing good, He had the ultimate triumph. The example of Jesus proves Peter's point in 1 Peter 3:9: when we suffer for doing good, we will inherit a blessing.

Jesus has gone into heaven, and it is better for us that He is there. Spurgeon related this to how the high priest, ministering for Israel on the Day of Atonement, disappeared from the people and went behind the veil. “Though he was not with them, he was with God, which was better for them. The high priest was more useful to them within the veil than outside of it; he was doing for them out of sight what he could not accomplish in their view. I delight to think that my Lord is with the Father. Sometimes I cannot get to God, my access seems blocked by my infirmity; but he is always with God to plead for me.”

Dear friends, we serve a risen Saviour, he's in the world today. Hallelujah! Serve him faithfully, whether you suffer persecution or not. Emulate his humility and love with your brothers and sisters in the church. Imitate his righteousness as you live in the world. Serve Christ with a clear conscience!