

This Exiled Life

Living as an Exile: How to thrive in suffering

1 Peter 3:18-22

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¹⁸For 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, ¹⁹in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, ²⁰because 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. ²¹Baptism, 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, ²²who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him. 1 Peter 3:18-22 (ESV)

Last week we had a great weekend of celebration around the death and resurrection of Jesus. Now we will return to our study in 1 Peter. As you may remember this epistle is a letter to exiles intended to give hope and encouragement to persevere awaiting a great inheritance in heaven. Two weeks ago, we looked at 1 Peter 3:17 and saw Peter's comment that it is "better to suffer for doing good ...". This truth is hard to swallow sometimes. It seems to be unfair. I remember as a kid feeling like others had it better than I did and it was "not fair." I then had kids and grandkids who repeat exactly what I said in the past. I read in the Bible of those who suffered in ways that seem "unfair" to me. People such as Job, Joseph, Daniel, Stephen—all suffered in ways that seemed unfair. In the early church, martyrs were killed unfairly, including Peter who was probably crucified—maybe upside down. A few years ago, I saw a site in Oxford where in the 16th century three men were martyred because they were Protestants. I have read of the unjust treatment of slaves in my own country and want to yell "unfair." I was speaking to one of our missionaries recently, who is ministering in an unreached part of the world and will remain anonymous, but told me several stories of people they know who were imprisoned for their faith and threatened with their lives.

Peter is arguing that we should expect suffering as exiles in this world. We may not experience it like others in history, but we must be ready for suffering if we are to be good citizens of the eternal kingdom. How do we do that? This text is very challenging, but at the core of the message is that a follower of Jesus can endure and thrive in suffering if our eyes are fixed on Jesus. **This text shows us three wonderful pictures with three wonderful words describing Jesus that help us persevere and thrive as exiles in a hostile world.**

1. Picture #1—Jesus suffers—keyword: FOR, v. 18a

1 Peter 3:18 is one of the most wonderful verses in the Bible. I want to look at it carefully and slowly to savor the beauty of its meaning. The core clause in the sentence is that Jesus suffered once for sins —the righteous for the unrighteous. This wonderful short clause follows verse 17 and the call to suffer for doing good. The great example of this is Jesus. He did it better than anyone. He had more grounds to yell “unfair,” yet he suffered once for all. This refers to His death as some manuscripts tried to insert. The wonderful mystery is that He suffered willingly knowing that He was suffering unjustly for the unjust. That is amazing.

“FOR” - The word I love in this point is the small word “for.” It is a huge word in this text. Karl Barth, a controversial but influential 20th century theologian, said this was his favorite word in the Bible. This word tells us of substitution. It could be translated “on behalf of,” or “instead of,” or “in place of,” or “in substitution for.” The amazing reality of this sentence is that the substitute is just (righteous) and the one who was substituted for is unjust. That is scandalous. A graphic illustration of this in the Bible is when Jesus was on trial and Pilate offered the treasonous Barabbas for Jesus and the crowd said that we want Jesus to die in place of Barabbas. What a twist of substitution. How horrible and how wonderful.

In CS Lewis’s classic allegory, *The Lion Witch and the Wardrobe*, the central scene has the lion Christ figure, Aslan, who is killed by the wicked witch. They had worked out an agreement that he would die for the rebellious child, Edmond. In answering questions clarifying what happened, Aslan said: “She (the witch) would not have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor’s stead, the table would crack and earth itself would start working backward.”

APPLICATION:

Suffering draws us to Jesus: As hard as it is to say, suffering is not bad in exile. It is hard but not bad. That sounds like what we have heard in sermons before. In the Christian economy, the crown is preceded by the cross. The goal is not merely to endure suffering but to grow in it. In suffering we grow closer to our suffering Lord. It uniquely functions as a means to draw us to Him

Jesus is our model for unjust suffering: When we experience unfair situations even when they are minor, like getting cut off in traffic, bad service in a restaurant, (Peter would laugh at these) we must see Jesus and follow Him. More to the text is the reality that we should live for Jesus in a way that may make a rebellious world exile us. Look to Jesus. Peter calls husbands and wives to live in an understanding and submissive way with our spouses. Look to Jesus when it seems unfair as we live out our exile.

Jesus is a friend of sinners (unjust): You may be here today and do not think Jesus cares about you because you have done too much wrong. Look carefully at this verse. He did not come for the just but for the unjust. The hymn writer said—“come ye sinner, poor and needy....if you tarry til you’re better, you will never come at all.”

2. Picture #2—Jesus saves—keyword: THAT, vv.18b-21

If the first point were the end of the discussion, the gospel would be shallow and frustrating. To just follow a suffering person is a dead-end. Obviously the text does not end there. The next word is huge.

“THAT” – The word “that” is no small word in the New Testament. The grammarians call it a word that introduces a purpose clause. It answers the “why” question. There was purpose in Christ’s suffering as the just for the unjust. It was not just a martyr activity with no purpose. The text tells what the purpose of the suffering is. Here it is...“That he might bring us to God.” Christ suffered so we could be right before God. If Paul had written this he probably would have said something like this: “Christ suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust that he might justify us.” The purpose was to allow for the unjust to come into a relationship with the just God. What a wonderful purpose.

I remember when I ruptured my Achilles tendon (I ruptured both at different times), the doctors said they needed to cut my leg but there was a purpose for it. The purpose for doing the surgery was so THAT I might be able to walk again. Peter describes this atonement by saying Jesus was put to death but made alive in the Spirit. Death then resurrection so He could save His people.

Now Peter gives two illustrations of salvation. One is from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament. They are both real hard passages to interpret. This is one of the toughest sections in 1 Peter and the whole New Testament. Luther is quoted as saying: “A wonderful text is this, and a more obscure passage perhaps than any other in the New Testament, so that is do not know for a certainty just what Peter means.” Who can argue with Luther? While I am not totally sure what this next section means (one commentator suggested there may be as many as 180 different combinations of views on the meaning), the overarching message seems to be that Jesus is a Savior of those who recognize their need. It also is intended to be a motivation for exiles suffering to know that not only is Jesus a model for suffering, He is a Savior through their suffering.

“Preaching to the spirits in prison” –This passage has two main interpretation streams. Some argue that Jesus spoke through Noah to the sinning people of his time who were committed to their sin (imprisoned) and unwilling to repent¹. Another view is that Jesus on His ascension to heaven proclaimed victory to evil spirits who were involved in the sin leading to the great judgment of the flood². As I am writing this manuscript I lean to the first view partly as I see Peter refer later to Noah (2 Peter 2:5) as a “herald of righteousness”. Peter seemed to like Noah as an Old Testament figure who saw God save. I can think of many pros and cons for these two main positions and again humble myself and say that the Bible has a beautiful mystery that exalts Christ and humbles the reader.

This section ends much more clearly as God is patient but people do not obey and finally when the flood comes eight are saved through water by an ark. The idea of being saved through water is that the saved

¹ Wayne Grudem, 1 Peter Tyndale Commentary. 2002, p.155ff

² New American Bible Commentary, Thomas Schreiner

ones were saved from the water and through the water. The suffering exiles can see salvation through judgment clearly in this Old Testament picture of Noah.

“Baptism... which now saves you” Here we go again. A controversial passage. For a very full and helpful treatment of the theology of baptism the book *Believer’s Baptism* published by B&H Publishing is very helpful. Some like the Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Disciples of Christ argue that this verse teaches that you must be baptized to be saved. Reading this passage in light of the whole of Scripture and in this context does not support that position. In fact, Peter says that baptism “corresponds to this” and the “this” is salvation through water by the ark. The word for “corresponds” is anti-type. The idea is that the Old Testament ark is a type to which New Testament baptism is related. Both are signs with bigger significance. The significance of baptism is not merely the physical act (removing dirt) but has a spiritual component. You do it based on an appeal to a good conscience. You understand the big picture of the work of God which saves you in Jesus’ death and resurrection (not unlike the ark saving in the flood). In chapter 1:18, Peter affirms that the exiles were redeemed by the precious blood of Jesus (no mention of an act of baptism). Salvation is not of works, but baptism is an evidence of salvation and union with Jesus in His saving death and resurrection. In the early church, they did not believe that baptism was necessary for salvation, BUT they would not have perceived of a believer who was not baptized. Verse 21 connects baptism and resurrection. The death symbolized in baptism (union with Jesus’ baptism, see Rom. 6) is followed up with the symbolism of new life in the resurrected Lord.

APPLICATION:

Come to Jesus as your Savior: So Jesus is our model of suffering and He is also our Savior. Jesus suffered with a reason. He wants to save people. He wants to provide a way to God. He did it in the time of Noah and He is doing it now. Noah and his family in the Old Testament and baptized believers in the New Testament are crying “Hallelujah, What a Savior.” So now is the day of salvation. Hear the call.

Be baptized and live out your baptism: This text is not a command to be baptized to be saved. It does, however, give the pattern that redeemed exiles are baptized. It is not for salvation, but it is the call of God to His followers to observe baptism as a sign that signifies your trust in the death and resurrection of Jesus as your substitute and savior from sin.

Suffering for Jesus is what saved, baptized people do: The symbols of our faith include suffering. Noah and the flood and baptism all are signs that demonstrate suffering. Even in baptism, we acknowledge that Jesus suffered for us. He was drowned in the flood of judgment for us so we can live. We share in His suffering as exiles being crucified with Christ (Gal. 2:29).

3. Picture 3—Jesus is Sovereign—keyword: “BUT”, vv. 21b-22 (and back to v. 18c)

This passage ends on a great high note! Jesus reigns. In a world where there is suffering, and even more so in a world where suffering is unjust as exiles are living for their Lord, Jesus will have the final word. In His resurrection and ascension, Jesus is now reigning and ruling in His world. In verse 22 Jesus ascends

and all the spiritual world is under His rule. He is the victor. The assumption is that all the universe is under His rule.

We can conclude this sermon and this final point by going back to the first verse in this section. In verse 18 Peter tells of the suffering Christ (remember v. 17—we will suffer also) suffered unjustly for the unjust to bring us to God. Then Peter tells the basis of this great restoration. **“Being put to death in the flesh BUT made alive in the Spirit.”** This is the beauty of our faith. This is another great BUT in the Bible. He did not stay dead BUT he is made alive. He is the living ruling king. He conquered death and suffering. We can live with that reality today. Our champion Jesus, the God/Man, suffered but now rules. His suffering set the stage for His ruling. The cross preceded the crown. As we live in this life of exile, we can experience life in Christ.

Tim Keller, in a sermon in 1994, dealt with this text and showed three benefits to the resurrection and ascension:

1. Death is tied to resurrection (1 Peter 3:18). Death does not end it all. Jesus died and rose again. That truth was at the heart of Abraham’s faith in suffering through offering Isaac (Heb. 11:19)
2. Resurrection is tied to the ascension (1 Peter 3:22)—Jesus rose and then is put on the throne. As the resurrected Lord we bow to Him and obey Him in all of life.
3. The risen Lord shows the life-giving reality of the Spirit (1 Peter 3:18). See 1 Peter 4:1 where we are told that suffering for Christ brings blessing from the Spirit. Today we can experience the blessings of the risen ruling Lord.

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