

1PETER 3:18-22 CBC 19.7.2020am

Read 1Peter 3:18-22 ...

This part of Peter's letter contains one of the most puzzling passages in the New Testament (the reference to Christ preaching to "*the spirits in prison*" in vv.19-20). It's ironic: Peter says (2Pe 3:16) that Paul's writings are sometimes tricky to understand – and here he is baffling the church for 2000 years! There are many highly technical arguments surrounding this passage, and various interpretations have been suggested. If you want the details, I refer you to Wayne Grudem's commentary on 1Peter, because that's not our focus today. This isn't an academic lecture, but a sermon aimed at glorifying Christ and equipping His people to follow Him.

So let me suggest a way to approach parts of the Bible that puzzle you because the details seem obscure. Look at the bigger picture! Focus on what's clear, not on what is unclear. What Peter is doing at this point in his letter is clear enough. His big theme is witnessing to Christ in a hostile world. He has been speaking about being ready to give an answer to anyone who asks about the hope that we have (v.15). And he knows (vv.16-17) that this may be costly. We may suffer for our faith in Jesus, no matter how good our life nor how kind our words.

What will keep us going in that situation? The answer, as ever, is Christ. That's the point Peter is making in vv.18-22. Keep your eyes on Jesus, says Peter, for He also suffered unjustly, like we do. He also bore witness in the face of hostility, like we do. And He was vindicated by God – and we will be too. That's Peter's big point, however we understand the details of the passage. How do we witness in a hostile world? By keeping our eyes on Jesus.

Do you remember the nursery rhyme:

*Pussy cat, pussy cat, where have you been?
I've been to London to see the Queen.
Pussy cat, pussy cat, what did you there?
I frightened a little mouse, under her chair.*

Sometimes we can be so busy chasing mice around chair-legs that we forget to focus on the One who is sitting on the throne! We're chasing after small details in the Bible and missing the bigger picture of Christ, the King of Kings. Well, today we've not come to look at the mice, but at the King on His throne. Because Peter wants to encourage us with Christ:

v.18 begins with the word "*For*" - that means v.18 is giving us a reason for doing what v.17 says. Why should we be prepared to suffer for doing good? Because that's what Jesus did – and that's how He rescued us.

1. CHRIST OUR SUFFERING SAVIOUR

v.18 "*For Christ also suffered*" - it's wonderful that the One we're following lived where we live and walked where we walk and suffered as we suffer. He understands. And His suffering wasn't pointless – He suffered for a great reason: "*to bring you to God.*"

v.18 is a wonderfully succinct explanation of what Christ has done for us. He "*suffered for sins*" – ours, not His, for He had none (1Peter 2:22). He died as *the righteous One* in place of the *unrighteous ones* – that's us. And His suffering was "*once for all*" - it never needs to be repeated (unlike the sacrifices of the Old Testament) because it achieved its goal: "*to bring us to God.*" Not

merely to pay our debt, but to lead us by the hand into the family of God. God actually adopts us as His children.

Why does Peter remind his readers of these things? Because these are people who are being mocked and abused as Christians, and he wants them to reflect on this incredible reality in their lives – that even though they’re rejected by their neighbours, they’ve received the most glorious acceptance any human being could ever have – acceptance with God through the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. *Do you think that encouraged them? Don’t focus on the mice, focus on Christ your Saviour who has brought you into the family of God.*

We would all be strengthened by saying to ourselves every day, *“God loves me, He gave His Son for me, and through the death of Christ I’ve been adopted into His family by His grace.”* That’s one of the best defences against the fear of other people. You don’t have to look for identity and acceptance in what others think of you, because you have them already because of the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. If you look to other people to give you these things, you’ll live on an emotional roller-coaster depending on people’s responses to you. But you don’t need to beg other people to give you a sense of worth – you already have it in Christ. Others may push you away, but God adopts you into His family forever.

Even if they kill you it won’t be the end, because you’re in Christ, and He has conquered death: v.18: *“He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit.”* That doesn’t mean “He died physically but was raised spiritually” - as if He were now some sort of ghost. Peter bore witness from the beginning that the grave was empty because Jesus’ body had been raised to life, not just His soul (Acts 2:29-32).

Rather, the contrast is between mortal life (which we experience in this world) and life in the realm of the Spirit, the life of the age to come, the life in which we shall never suffer and die again. Jesus died in this mortal realm, and rose into the life of the age to come, the life that can never perish. That’s the life He shares with us even while we’re in these mortal, dying bodies. That’s why the New Testament speaks of us HAVING eternal life – a present possession. That’s how secure we are. Our opponents can rob us of mortal life (if God permits) – but that’s as far as they can go. In Christ, we’ve got the life of the age to come, and they can’t touch that. What a Saviour!

2. CHRIST THE PATIENT PREACHER

In that spiritual realm, He preached to *“the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah”* (v.20). Note: our Bible translation begins v.19 *“After being made alive ...”* BUT that’s an interpretation, not a translation. Scrub it out of your mind! The footnote gives a literal rendering of the Greek: Christ was *“made alive in the spirit, in which also He went and preached ...”* Christ preached in the spiritual realm – but Peter doesn’t spell out when! Indeed, there’s a great deal he doesn’t spell out. Who are these spirits (fallen angels or people)? When – and where – and what – did Jesus preach to them? *Beware of reading into the text what isn’t there!*

It’s impossible to be sure what Peter is referring to, and if you want the various options you can look at Grudem’s commentary. And if you disagree with what I’m going to suggest, God bless you, go in peace!

I think Peter is saying this: that back in the days of Noah, Christ was preaching through Noah to the disobedient people of that day – the people whose spirits are now in prison.

Peter said something similar in 1:10-11: when the prophets preached in the Old Testament, it was actually the Spirit of Christ preaching through them. Now he says it was the same with Noah. Noah too was a preacher (Peter calls him “*a preacher of righteousness*”, 2Peter 2:5) – but it was actually the Spirit of Christ preaching through him. And all the while, God was patiently waiting, giving them an opportunity to repent.

Christ, by His Spirit, was preaching through the prophets in the Old Testament, including Noah, and this is what He does by His Spirit through His people in every generation. He preached through Peter, and through the church in Peter’s day, and He preaches through us today. And it was costly then and it’s costly now.

In fact, the situation of Peter’s readers was similar to that of Noah in many ways, and so is ours: a believing minority surrounded by unbelievers, called to live a holy life in an unholy world, and to witness boldly in the face of mockery and abuse. It’s the similarity with Noah’s situation which prompts Peter to remind us of Noah preparing the ark.

Remember the big theme: witnessing to unbelievers so that they might be brought to God. Living in a way that causes people to ask WHY. That was Noah! It was impossible to hide an ark that big, so Noah had to give an explanation. And the explanation was that he believed God’s word of salvation and judgement. And he went on giving that explanation for a long time until the flood actually came. And in the same way, Christians are to bear witness for a long time until the day of final salvation and judgement comes.

Imagine being that man – what he endured day after day, year after year, decade after decade. It took a long time to build that ark. There was no water. He looked crazy. But he acted on God’s word until God’s word was proved true, and Noah’s faith was vindicated by the power of God.

And Peter says, Do you know how he did it? It was the Spirit of Christ preaching through him, sustaining him, strengthening him to be a witness despite the hostility. And the same Spirit of Christ now dwells in you and makes Christ known through you. Let that encourage you!

Never forget that though Noah’s witness went unheeded, he and his family found salvation in the ark, just as God promised. In the same way, Peter says that we find salvation in a watery setting, through baptism – though Peter is careful to explain that it isn’t the actual water that saves, but what it symbolises (v.21 – “*not the removal of dirt from the body*” – it’s not magic water! Peter has already said in v.18 that our salvation is accomplished through the sacrificial death of Jesus). But I can look back to my baptism and look forward to what it pictures: my passing through judgment and enjoying glory with Christ. Because Christ is:

3. CHRIST THE RISEN AND EXALTED LORD

Faith in Jesus, expressed in baptism, means salvation for us because He’s the risen, reigning Lord vv.21-22: “*It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand – with angels, authorities and powers in submission to Him.*”

How encouraging is that? We’re called to do good and to witness, even though we suffer for it. BUT we live this way in the certainty of final victory and glory. We’re not following a dead martyr but a living Lord who can actually empower us because He has all authority in heaven and on earth. Peter has been telling us earlier in the letter to submit to various authorities, and now he says that all these authorities are actually in submission to Christ! They can’t lift a finger without His permission, and finally they’ll bow the knee to Him. THAT’S our Lord!

Do you see the implications? If you belong to Jesus Christ, nothing can destroy you. You need never be afraid. All things end in the triumph of Christ. There'll be a day when the mockery and rejection and sadness will end, and we'll be with Him forever. He won't rest until that work is complete in every one of His children.

CONCLUSION

SO fix your eyes on Jesus!

- Are you suffering unjustly? So did He – and it led to the salvation of others.
- Are you patiently witnessing to unpromising people? So did Christ – in Noah's day, and ever since.
- Are you longing to be vindicated? Well, Christ already has been, and you will share His triumph.

That's how the paragraph works. Peter says that as we live a gospel lifestyle, people will ask questions. And Christ, who gave His life to bring sinners to God, and who all through history has been witnessing through His people by His Spirit, and who now reigns at God's right hand – THIS Christ will be with you, to hold you and finally to vindicate you.

I hope you're as encouraged by that as I am. Don't chase Bible mice around chair legs. Look at the King on the throne. What a Lord! Doesn't it make you want to say with Thomas, "*MY Lord and MY God!*" (John 20:28)? I hope you can say today, "Jesus Christ is MY Lord!"

PRAYER: We thank You, Father, for our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. Grant that by Your Spirit we may walk in His footsteps for the salvation of many, and share in His triumph, to the praise of Your glorious grace. AMEN.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

- Where in your life and witness do you need to remember Christ:
 - as the suffering Saviour?
 - as the patient preacher?
 - as the risen and exalted Lord?