

"Vindicated in Christ" - 1 Peter 3:18-22

While our text this week begins with verse 18, I probably should go back to verse 17 for just a moment. Verse 17 is transitional. It is a summary of what Peter had been teaching up to that point.

Peter has been teaching us how we Christians are to live and respond to a culture that is hostile to Christianity. We are not to adopt the tactics of the world. We are not to seek retribution. We are to return love for hate, grace for hostility, and blessing for cursing. And if we live as Christ would have us live, many people will recognize the fact that we're not that bad to have around. They might even ask us about the hope that we demonstrate and then we can tell them about Jesus.

But we need to be realistic. The prince of this world hates Jesus and he hates those who belong to Jesus. So we may very well be called on to suffer. But if so, we need to make sure that we're suffering for doing good. So Peter says:

For it is better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. (1 Peter 3:17)

To support his point, he uses the very best example out there. He uses Jesus. Nobody has and nobody will suffer to the extent Jesus suffered. Jesus suffered at the hands of sinful human beings to be sure: the mockery of a kangaroo court, the fickle crowds, who had only a few days before cheered Him as He entered Jerusalem, cried "Crucify Him!" His back flayed open by a Roman scourge. Then He was nailed to a cross to suffer the most excruciating of deaths.

But that physical suffering was nothing compared to the wrath of God poured out full-strength on the Son of Man. His was the only sinless human life ever lived, yet He bore the punishment I deserve. He bore the weight of countless millions of eternities in hell. He took the hit for everyone who would believe on His name. No wonder He cried "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani!" Jesus most certainly suffered for doing good.

But in His resurrection, He was vindicated. The sacrifice He made was accepted. The penalty was paid in full. And yes it was ...

... for the joy that was set before Him [that He] endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:2)

Jesus was vindicated! He is forever vindicated! And if you are a Christian, you are vindicated in Him. So let's turn again to our text for this morning.

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, (1 Peter 3:18)

That, my friends, is the gospel ... right there. Jesus is absolutely, pristinely, righteously just, absolutely no sin is found in Him. But you, are completely unjust. I am completely unjust.

The LORD looks down from heaven upon the children of men, To see if there are any who understand, who seek God. They have all turned aside, They have together become corrupt; There is none who does good, No, not one. (Psalms 14:2-3)

...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, (Romans 3:23)

Jesus the just, suffered for the unjust. He suffered for you and He suffered for me.

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

Why did Jesus die for us? Peter tells us right here in verse 18: *that He might bring us to God ... that He might bring us to God!* You see, our sins and transgressions alienate us from God.

*Behold, the LORD's hand is not shortened, That it cannot save; Nor His ear heavy, That it cannot hear. **But your iniquities have separated you from your God; And your sins have hidden His face from you, So that He will not hear.** (Isaiah 59:1-2)*

Our sins separate us from God. God is too holy to remain in the presence of sin and because He is perfectly just, every sin must be punished.

For the wages of sin is death, (Romans 6:23a)

Death entered this world because of sin and the just wage for our sin is eternal death, a forever and forever of being in the process of death, wishing and hoping for annihilation, but annihilation will never come. Hell is a place where your worm will not die and your fire will not be quenched. It is a place of the most excruciating torment, a torment will never end.

But Jesus suffered that He might bring us to God.

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:23)

Jesus died for you and He died for me. He died so that we could be reconciled back to God. He took on our sins; we get to take on His righteousness. We call it imputed righteousness. We are covered by the blood of Jesus. It is offered as a gift, and all we have to do is accept that gift by faith.

... that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. (Romans 10:9-10)

That's why Peter says Jesus was ... *put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit.* Jesus really died, but He didn't stay dead. No tomb made by human hands could hold the Son of God. On the third day He rose. Over the next 40 days He appeared to many witnesses. Those witnesses testified of His resurrection. Most of those witnesses sealed their testimony by their own martyrdom.

After 40 days, Jesus ascended into heaven and sat down at the right hand of the Father. He sat down because His work of redemption was done. Satan was defeated and if by faith you call on the name of Jesus, you have been set free from sin's slavery because Jesus was put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit.

Now we come to a very difficult passage:

... [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.
(1 Peter 3:19-20)*

Who are these “spirits in prison”? There are a number of different interpretations out there. Good, Bible-believing theologians disagree on this. I’m going to share a few of the most prominent theories, then I’m going to let you know what I think. I’m also going to show you that it really doesn’t matter all that much who these “spirits” are because the point Peter is making is that Jesus was completely vindicated despite His suffering. He is vindicated not only in His resurrection, but also because His sacrifice was effective in saving the elect.

So, theory number one: After His death and prior to His resurrection, Jesus descended into the place of the dead to preach to those who died before the Gospel was fully manifest. In other words, He gave all those Old Testament folks a chance to accept Him as their Savior. The trouble with this theory is that it ignores the historical context; These were folks who were disobedient “in the days of Noah”, which certainly limits the number of people referred to.

Theory number two: “Souls in prison” refer to the fallen angels. The idea is, Jesus entered hell to proclaim His victory. It was like a victory parade in the enemy’s camp. There is a similar theory that says that He proclaimed His victory to Satan and the demons after the Resurrection.

Theory number three: Jesus entered hell to preach and proclaim His victory to those of Noah’s generation ... those folks who mocked the construction of the Ark. I think that’s a little closer, but I can’t quite buy it.

There are other theories, many of which are variations of the three I’ve mentioned. Any of them might be correct, so please don’t take this as a confident assertion on my part. But here is what I think: Jesus is *ho Logos* – the word of God. It’s the way John refers to Him as he begins his gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1)

As the Word of God, Jesus is both the messenger of the New Covenant, and He is the Message. The Gospel, essentially, is Jesus Christ and all of scripture testifies of Him. The Bible is Christocentric – the whole thing reveals Jesus Christ. So given the short context of this passage, I believe Peter is referring to those individuals who lived at the time of Noah but the preaching of Christ took place during the 70 years that Noah was constructing the ark. In other words, the pre-incarnate Christ was preaching through Noah, who is called a preacher of righteousness in 2 Peter 2:5.

Anyone who has not accepted Jesus Christ as his or her Savior is imprisoned. Their spirits are in prison. Satan has them in captivity and they are slaves to sin. And when the Gospel is preached, when Christ is preached, they will either accept the free gift of salvation or they will remain in their chains. Sadly, so many choose to remain in chains despite the fact that their escape is so easily attained. If they would just acknowledge their sinfulness and turn to the cross, they would be set free and if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed. (John 8:36)

Look what happened in Noah’s day.

... a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water.

Given studies of population dynamics, it is very likely that there were billions of people alive at that time yet only 8 were saved. They entered the ark, which, by the way, is a type of Christ. God shut and sealed the door and they were saved from destruction in the midst of the global flood.

There is also an antitype which now saves us—baptism (1 Peter 3:21a)

Peter is telling us that the flood, and the salvation of Noah's family was typical of something that happens in our day. A type is a foreshadowing of a coming event or of a coming person. It is a symbol that points to something that will take place in the future. An antitype is the fulfillment of that symbol. Where the type is a shadow of something to come, the antitype is the real thing, the real deal.

Peter says baptism is what the ark and the flood were pointing to. But then, he has to quickly clarify something for us, so he adds, as a parenthetical statement:
... (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God).

Baptism is not a magic rite. Water baptism will not save you. Salvation is by the grace of God alone, and there is no work we can possibly do to add to God's gracious work. Salvation is accomplished in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. When we accept His sacrifice by faith, we are saved. Peter says, essentially, it's not the act of getting wet, but it is the answer, or testimony of a good conscience toward God.

Should you be baptized? Yes! It is an act of obedience. It is an act of public testimony. There are numerous accounts in the New Testament indicating that water baptism was the expected response of a new believer. Baptism is a public proclamation of the new birth the believer has already experienced. As you are immersed in the water, you declare your identity with Christ in His death and burial. As you come up out of the water, you declare your identity with Christ in His resurrection. You proclaim that you are a new creature in Jesus Christ.

We're going to have a baptism up at Quarter Circle Bridge on August 17. If you have never been baptized, or if you feel led to rededicate yourself to Jesus, here's your opportunity. I'd like to meet with you first though, so I can explain it more fully.

When you proclaim your faith and trust in Jesus Christ, you are immediately joined with Him. You undergo a spiritual baptism. You are given the gift of the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit is the seal, or the earnest, or the guarantee of your salvation.

The very fact that Jesus has reconciled a people to Himself vindicates His work on our behalf. He is victorious. His suffering, as horrible as it was, was worth it for the joy that was set before Him. And do you know what that joy is? It is you! His joy is everyone who has found salvation in His name. You are with Him in spirit; He is with you in spirit. But He can't wait for you to be with Him in person. He prayed:

"Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me; for You loved Me before the foundation of the world. (John 17:24)

So if you are called on to suffer for the cause of Christ, know that your suffering will be vindicated. You will be vindicated through the resurrection of Jesus 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. (1 Peter 3:22)

No matter what this world throws at you, *no matter* what arrows Satan may sling, you are absolutely secure in Jesus.

Satan has sown the seeds of fear and he continues to do so. It is yielding a harvest of hate and the world is getting darker because of it. But as the world gets darker, our light must shine brighter. Don't fall for the enemy's schemes. Don't return evil for evil or reviling for reviling. Love your enemies, *bless* those who curse you, *do* good to those who hate you. Pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you. You will be vindicated in Christ!