

“Safely Through Water”

The Eighth in a Series of Sermons on 1 Peter

Texts: 1 Peter 3:18-22; Genesis 6:11-22

All of us have consciences which accuse us because we have all sinned against God and disobeyed his commandments. And so whenever we suffer or are persecuted by those with power over us, there is a little voice within which says to us, “why, of course, you are suffering.” “God is punishing you because you did this, or because you did that.” To those first century Christians of the Diaspora undergoing difficult trials, and no doubt, wondering if God has abandoned them because of something they had done to displease him, Peter offers a wonderful word of encouragement, something which can silence the accusatory voice, as well as remind us of the promise that no matter what happens in this life, everything will turn out in the end just as God has promised. God has given to us a suffering Savior, who has died for our sins. And God has given us a tangible promise (the waters of baptism) that he will save his people—his elect exiles—on the day of judgment.

We are continuing our series on 1 Peter, and I am again reminded of the difficulties in not being able to preach through a book like 1 Peter in bigger chunks, or ideally, in one sermon. Our text this time (vv. 18-22 of 1 Peter 3) is the conclusion to the preceding section (vv. 2:11-3:17). The closing verses of chapter 3 are intended to remind those sufferers whom Peter has been addressing of the meaning of Christ’s suffering on behalf of his fellow sufferers. Jesus’ perfect humility and suffering as the God-man took him to the cross. His death saves us from our sins—even those sins we committed when we have responded to those who curse and revile us with curses and reviling of our own. Our text speaks a word of pardon to all of us who have cursed and reviled our enemies, and who have sought to take vengeance into our own hands, and who have not properly submitted to those authorities mentioned by the Apostle. In effect, Peter follows his series imperatives—“do this”—with a wonderful indicative—Jesus’ death covers our sins when we fail to comply with those imperatives which Peter has set forth. And hearing the indicatives, in turn, gives us a desire to obey the imperatives.

In the previous section (vv. 8-17), Peter instructs Christians not curse and revile those who curse and revile us, but rather to return to them a word of blessing. Christians are to do this because God hears the prayers of his oppressed people and promises that he will deliver us from those who have wronged his people. Peter understands how difficult this is to do, which is why he offers a word of encouragement from Psalm 34, before reminding us that Jesus’ death removes the guilt of our sin and brings us to God. In the section of Peter’s epistle we are covering (vv. 18-22), Peter describes the benefits we receive from Jesus’ humility and suffering. Jesus dies for us and in our place, so that our sins are forgiven. In imitating the humility of Jesus, Peter reminds us, Christians point their oppressors back to the sinless Savior in whom alone men and women may be saved, and so that Christians may receive better treatment from the hands of their oppressors.

In a letter such as this—one closely tied to specific historical circumstances—some background is important to enable us to understand why Peter addresses the issues he does, and so that we can draw proper application in our own circumstances. Peter is writing to a group of persecuted Christians in Asia Minor. Although they have been cast from their homes, and are now aliens in their own county, Peter reminds them that they are nevertheless elect exiles of God, a chosen race, and a royal priesthood. The Apostle knows full-well that his readers are facing very difficult times. Repeatedly, Peter exhorts these

Christian sojourners to endure their trials patiently, and to wait for the Lord to deliver them. Yet, Peter also reminds them that because they have been set apart by God (sanctified), and sprinkled with the blood of Jesus, they are heirs to a glorious heavenly inheritance which exceeds anything we can imagine. Christians, Peter says, must keep this promise before our eyes, especially whenever God calls us to endure times of trial. But this is the pattern of the Christian life. The cross and the crown of thorns precedes the empty tomb and our glorious entrance into the presence of the Lord.

To illustrate his larger point about God's ability to deliver his people from the apparent jaws of disaster, Peter turns to the account of Noah (part of which we read as our Old Testament lesson), who was delivered from a catastrophic judgment (the flood) which God brought against the unbelieving inhabitants of the earth bent upon persecuting the righteous (Noah and his family). God told Noah to obey his command, build the ark, and not return the evil he suffered from those laughing at him, cursing him, and reviling him. God saved believing Noah and his family from these dire circumstances by a flood, an historical event which Peter now connects to Christian baptism. Just as God delivered Noah and his family through the waters of judgment, so too God "saves" Christians through the waters of baptism—I'll explain what that means, exactly, in a moment.

The very same event which saved Noah and his family (a very small number of people in contrast to the mass of humanity consumed by the water of the flood) also brought judgment upon those mocking Noah because he believed God's promise. The reason why Peter turns to the account of Noah is simply to remind the persecuted Christians of Asia Minor that God knows how to save his people even in the midst of what appears to be a disaster. It is one thing to make a promise, it is another if the one making the promise has a perfect track recording of keeping them, as well as the power to make good on them. If God's promises to Noah are ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ, then the Christians of the Diaspora should be greatly encouraged by the reminder that God can save them as well. After all, the same God who delivered Noah is now revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ to whose death and resurrection they are united in baptism—the visible sign and seal of God's covenant promises.¹

While many of our contemporaries are taught to look within during times of trial to see if they really believe (or if their faith is strong enough), Peter does something completely different. He instructs us to look outside ourselves, not reply upon our feelings, but to look instead to the promises which God swore to us on his sovereign oath in our baptism. God's promises do not depend upon human feelings or emotions, but upon concrete historical events through which God has saved his people in the past, and which remind us that God will keep his promise to deliver us no matter what our circumstances may be.

As we turn to our text, verses 18–22, Peter makes a remarkable assertion in verse 18. "*For 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.*" Here is the gospel promise which follows the series of imperatives (commands). The emphasis in Peter's discussion of the work of Christ falls upon the fact that Jesus suffered, once, for our sins. The worst part about our suffering—as Peter's readers were, no doubt experiencing—is the terrible thought that the reason why things are so tough is that God is punishing us because he is angry with us for something we have done. The sufferings of Jesus remind us that God often has greater purposes in suffering, and as we see in the life and ministry of Jesus, suffering

¹ G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic; 2007), 1038-1039.

is never the last word for God's people. It is through his suffering and humiliation that Jesus actually defeated the devil and those principalities and powers allied against our Lord.

To put it another way, those called to suffer should see in the cross of Christ the wrath and anger of God poured out upon human sin. God is not going to punish Jesus for our sins, and then turn around and punish us for them again a second time. Jesus suffered once for sin. His death was God's final word about the guilt and power of sin. The sufferer need not fear that they are suffering is because God is punishing them for their own sins, when Jesus has already suffered for them and in their place, turning aside the wrath and anger of God. But in God's economy, suffering is often the means of victory, especially when it comes to those with power over us. As one writer states, "just as suffering was the pathway to exaltation for Christ, so also suffering is the prelude to glory for believers."² Whatever suffering we may endure pales in the light of eternity, and cannot be seen as God's punishment.

Furthermore, Peter adds that Jesus suffered "*the righteous for the unrighteous.*" The language here is yet another loud echo from Isaiah 52-53. Jesus alone was without sin. He obeyed God's law with perfect obedience, in his thinking, doing, and speaking. And yet, Jesus died for the sake of (on behalf of) the unrighteous, people who sin constantly in our thinking, doing, and speaking. This is what we mean when we speak of a substitutionary atonement—Jesus died to satisfy God's holy justice in the place of sinners. Peter could not be any clearer about the nature of Jesus' death. It was not merely an example to us of how seriously God takes sin (the so-called governmental theory of the atonement, nor the governmental theory's first cousin, the moral influence theory). Jesus dies for sin, once, in the place of the sinner (the unrighteous). For all those for whom Christ dies, the cross is God's final word about their sin. Period.

The knowledge of this truth (upon which the Gospel itself is grounded) does two things. First, it demonstrates to the sufferer that whatever their suffering means in the larger purposes of God (something which the sufferer may never know in this life), they can be assured that their suffering does not stem from God's retributive wrath toward them. Second, the sufferings of Jesus are the means through which Jesus brings us to God. Christ's own suffering upon the cross was followed by his resurrection and ascension—just as our suffering will be. Suffering is never the last word. Jesus' death accomplishes something which no earthly priest can—the death of Jesus opens heaven to us because when the righteous dies for the unrighteous, God's wrath is turned aside, the guilt of sin has been removed, and enemies (God and sinful humans) have now been reconciled. This is Peter's way of affirming what John does in John 14:6—"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me," and what Paul says in Romans 5:2—"Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God."

The final clause of verse 18, "*being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit,*" is closely connected to the clauses which follow in verses 19-20—"in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared." These are difficult verses and there is no end to the speculation about what they mean. Luther once said he wasn't sure at all of what Peter was taking about. A wise man . . . Who are the spirits in prison? Who preached and what was proclaimed to the hearers? Before we can answer these questions, we need to address Peter's comments at the end of verse 18.

² Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, vol. 37, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), Logos Bible Software, 3.18.

When Jesus was put to death in the flesh, Peter is obviously speaking of his death upon the cross. When Peter speaks of Jesus being made alive in the spirit, he is not thinking of Jesus' being alive as a spirit between the cross and resurrection, but of the resurrection itself ("made alive" i.e., brought back from the dead). Paul's comment in Romans 8:11, is particularly helpful here, and I take Peter to be speaking in the same way Paul does, when the latter writes, "*if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.*" The point is that even though Jesus died at the hands of the Romans, the Holy Spirit raised Jesus bodily from the dead. Elect exiles should be confident that even though they face great hardship, and even perhaps death, they will immediately enter God's presence when they die, and then be bodily raised by Jesus at the end of the age.³ This gives us the context to answer the difficult questions raised by verses 19-20. This is one of those places where scholars are greatly divided about what Peter means, and there are multiple interpretations, two of which stand out as viable.

Who are the spirits in prison mentioned by Peter? Many interpreters have followed Augustine in arguing that Peter is referring to Noah's preaching of Christ (i.e., that God would send a Savior) to those on earth before the flood. Some have argued that this refers to believers before the coming of Jesus (the Old Testament saints) who were liberated by Jesus between the time of his death and resurrection (Calvin's view). Others (Cranfield) believe that these are the souls who perished in the flood—that Jesus descended into the netherworld to preach to them. Most commentators today believe the passage refers to Christ's proclamation of victory over the fallen angels (Nephilim) who were imprisoned because they sinned by having sexual relations with women. The first view (Augustine's), and the majority view, have far and away the most going for them.

The majority view understands the account of Genesis 6:1-4 and story of the Nephilim—to which Peter alludes—as a reference to angels, with the Sons of God as their offspring (from sexual relations with angels). This may fit with 2 Peter 2:4, where Peter refers to the fact that "*if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment.*"⁴ But here Peter seems to be saying that the prison is the place where the angels were cast when they fell—not when the Nephilim supposedly mated with humans. And this view downplays Peter's emphasis upon the preaching of Noah, and implies the improbable notion that angels and human could procreate. While this view emphasizes Christ's victory over the evil angels, it disconnects the importance of Noah to Peter's overall point, and moves the preaching mentioned by Peter to a point between Christ's death and resurrection, not to the days of Noah.

I find Meredith Kline's interpretation of this passage to be helpful, especially in light of verse 22, where Peter specifically connects the preaching which takes place to the days of Noah, not to the preaching of Jesus between his death and resurrection. Kline takes a view similar to Augustine's in that "Noah performed prophetic preaching as the mouth of the Spirit of Christ."⁵ Noah proclaimed law and gospel to the people of his day, announcing that covenant blessings would come through faith followed by

³ Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, Logos 3:18.

⁴ See the summaries in: Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, Logos 3:19; and Peter H. Davids, The First Epistle of Peter, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 138-141.

⁵ Kline, Kingdom Prologue, 128-129.

repentance, while those curses threatened in God's covenant lawsuit (recall that the Lord had cursed the ground in Genesis 5:29), would be meted out against sinful humanity unless the world repented.

According to the Genesis account, Noah's preaching began shortly after the great rebellion manifest in the days of Nephilim. So much so, we read in Genesis 6:5-7 that, "*The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, 'I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them.'* But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD." In these verses God announces the impending destruction of humanity—except Noah, and his families who truly were elect exiles on the earth.

Since Peter specifically refers to God's patience in the days of Noah in verse 20, this would seem to connect the preaching of Christ to Noah's heralding of righteousness, which fits well with Peter's assertion in 2 Peter 2:5, that "*if [God] did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven others, when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly,*" where the focus is upon Noah as a preacher of righteousness, announcing the coming judgment and calling for repentance. This is especially the case in light of Kline's point about the long-suffering patience of God coming to an end, when those living on the earth are bound over to judgment (the one hundred twenty years mentioned in Genesis 6:3). This indicates that the souls in prison, are those living under the threatened covenant curse from the one hundred and twenty years dating from the time of the Sons of God (Genesis 6:3), until God closed the door of the ark and it began to rain.

Who are the spirits in prison? I take them to be those living in the one hundred and twenty years from the days of the Nephilim until the flood. The death sentence was pronounced by God, Noah preached repentance, and when the world rejected him, God sent the flood. The majority view takes these spirits to be angels who procreated with women and were imprisoned for doing so. How was Jesus preached to these spirits? I take this to be to the prophetic office of Noah, who was a herald of righteousness. What was the content of that preaching? I take this to be the covenant blessings and curses associated with the warning of impending judgment. The majority view takes this to be Christ's proclamation of his victory over the fallen angels after his death and resurrection (a strength), but then Noah's preaching becomes incidental to Peter's illustration (a weakness).

While these verses have long fascinated people, we must make sure that we do not allow speculation about what, exactly, Peter means to obscure the importance he places upon the example of Noah being rescued from the evil men of his day serving as a promise to the elect exiles in Peter's day. Then, there is the role of baptism "saving" Noah in light of the waters of the flood, the judgment which God sent upon the earth. At the end of verse 20, while Noah was preparing the ark, Peter marvels at how "*a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water.*" The very same element which God used to bring judgment upon the world, is the element through which God saves this seemingly insignificant family (Mr. and Mrs. Noah, their three sons and their wives). By placing his people in the ark, God brings them safely through the threatened judgment which now wipes out the world.

In verses 21-22, Peter connects the waters of the flood (judgment) directly to baptism. "*Baptism, 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, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.*" Reformed Christians get nervous whenever baptism is described as "saving." The reason why is obvious. The Roman church

teaches that the water of baptism remits the guilt of original sin and infuses grace into the child, grace which must be allowed to manifest itself in the inside-out transformation of the sinner into truly a righteous person. Then, there are groups like the Churches of Christ which teach that baptism is something we must do in order to be saved. The Reformed confessions reject both the idea that baptism is a saving work we must do, or that the act of baptism regenerates.

The Bible consistently teaches that sinners are saved by grace, through faith, on account of Christ. We do not teach that baptism is the cause of regeneration—the Spirit regenerates, not the minister applying water to the person being baptized. Yet baptism does something to and for the baptized. Peter tells us that it is not that the waters of baptism washes off dirt from our bodies making us clean, rather, baptism is tied to an appeal (or pledge) of a good conscience, and therefore, to the salvation of God’s people from the covenant curse which will come upon the earth.

The pledge associated with baptism is that of a good conscience. In light of Peter’s use of the account of Noah, through the waters of the flood, God brought judgment upon the earth. This was the covenant curse being meted out against the unbelieving world. In Hebrews 11:7, the author speaks of Noah as follows. *“By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.”* When Noah entered the ark with his family (the pledge of a good conscience—i.e., that Noah believed God’s promise), then he and his family, were made heirs to the righteousness which comes by faith. He and his household were saved from the judgment of God. God made a promise, by faith Noah believed that promise, then ratified that promise (a pledge of a good conscience) built the ark, gathered the animals, and waited for God to close the door of the ark, sending the flood. God promised, Noah believed and acted—the pledge of a good conscience.

Peter’s word of encouragement to the suffering Christians of the Diaspora (and to us all) is that just as Noah believed, entered the ark, and was saved by the same waters which destroyed the earth, so too, those Christians who believe God’s promise, ratify that promise through baptism. The baptismal vows are in a sense the pledge from a good conscience, to trust that we are the people of God who will be spared from that judgment which is to come upon the whole world—this time not by a flood, but by fire. This is very much like Paul’s statement in Romans 6:3-4, where we read, *“do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”* To be baptized, Paul says, is to be buried with Christ (in the ordeal of his death) and then to be raised to newness of life with Christ in his life-giving resurrection.

Christ’s death and resurrection saves us from death and gives us life. Baptism, then, is the visible sign of what Jesus gives us through faith in his promise through the power of the Holy Spirit. So too, those Christians who are baptized, are properly said to be saved from the wrath to come, by the resurrection of Christ. Baptism saves then, in the sense what those who are baptized, have the external sign and seal (the visible word) that they will be saved from death and the grave by Jesus’ bodily resurrection. Like Noah, those whose pledge of a good conscience (i.e., that they believe the promises of God and therefore submit themselves and their children to God in baptism), trust that they will be saved from the judgment to come upon those who persecute them, even as God saved Noah from the waters of the flood.

But Peter promises even more to the baptized. The same Jesus who was raised to life *has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.* Jesus has not only conquered death, he is now at the right hand of God and all powers—Caesar,

angels, even death—are subject to him. God has promised this to us in his word, and then through the pledge of a good conscience, we ratify that promise when we enter the waters of judgment (baptism), believing we will pass safely through the water, even as Noah was saved by the flood, even as the Israelites were saved from Pharaoh by passing through the Red Sea on dry ground, and even as Jesus defeated death by being buried in the tomb before rising again from the dead.

This, beloved, is why we must learn to look outside ourselves during times of trial, testing, suffering, and persecution. We must teach ourselves to look to the cross, the empty tomb, and to the waters of baptism, so that when that voice inside begins to remind us of all our sins, we can answer back to that voice in our heads, “shut up.” “Be still.” “My savior died for me.” “His tomb is empty.” “And I have been saved from the wrath to come by my baptism, because God has brought me `safely through water.””

And this how baptism saved Noah and his family, the Christians of the Diaspora, and you and me.