*Once for All*

1 Peter 3:18-22

3/19/23

Listen to how one commentary introduces this passage: *1 Peter 3:18-22 is not merely the most difficult passage in 1 Peter; it is one of the most challenging texts in the entire NT.* That was an encouraging way to start sermon prep in a week. There are 3-4 streams of thought around the meaning of this text. I am not going to try to wade through them all this morning, as I believe that would be unprofitable for us. If you are inquisitive, you are welcome to pursue that on your own. If you come to different conclusions than I do, particularly vs. 19-20, then blessings upon you. Godly people disagree over the finer details of this text. It is not something to get lost on.

To understand this text, we need to know its place in the flow of the letter. Peter is instructing us on what it means to be elect exiles in the world. He does this by showing the connection between belief in Christ and the transformed behavior that it produces. The gospel is everywhere in this letter. It opened with the great gospel declaration of 1:3-9, which is revisited in 1:18-19, 2:4-8, and 21-25. Now he directs our attention to it again because faithfulness in the face of the world’s opposition is rooted in the redeeming work of Jesus Christ.

Our text continues the theme we looked at last week. My NASB presents vs. 13-22 as one paragraph. Vs. 18 is prompted by the content of vs. 17, where we are told that it is better to suffer for doing right than to suffer for doing wrong. Now, Peter points us to Christ as the ultimate example of someone who not only suffered for doing right, but by doing so accomplished the will of God. The point of this passage, despite some of the challenging statements along the way, is clear: the salvation that our Savior-King accomplished is a complete salvation. These truths should encourage suffering saints to press on in their service to Christ.

Let us consider then, the purpose of Christ’s suffering in vs. 18. This verse makes five observations about Jesus’ redeeming work. First, His death was a sacrifice for sin. Before sin even became a reality in the world, God warned us that disobedience would bring death. This death is first a spiritual death, as our relationship with God is severed. Spiritual death is eventually expressed in our physical death. Physical death brings us to the point of God’s judgment. Those who die in their sin experience another death…eternal death in hell where they receive the just consequences of their sin. All of this is contained in the death that sin brings.

But God provided a way to escape the death of sin. Salvation comes through the sacrifice of a substitute. This sacrifice is pictured throughout the OT, starting in Eden when God covers the shame of Adam and Eve’s sin with the skin of an animal. This substitutionary atonement is pictured in the sacrifices of Abel and Noah, the story of Abraham’s sacrifice to Isaac, the Passover Lamb, and all the sacrifices prescribed in the Law. They point to Christ, whose death on the cross was a sacrifice for our sin. Hebrews 9:11ff. teaches us that through His death on the cross, Jesus entered the Tabernacle of heaven to offer Himself as a sacrifice for sin. The infinite worth of His righteousness means that He can forgive an infinite number of people of an infinite amount of sin. Jesus died for sins He did not commit, so that those who did commit them could be right with God*.*

Secondly, Jesus’ death ended any further need for sacrifice. His sacrifice was once for all. Although the OT sacrificial system gave hope for forgiveness, there was also a hopelessness to it, for it had to be repeated day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year. There was no end to the need for sacrifice, for these sacrifices could not solve our sin problem. It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to remove our sin. Only Jesus’ blood can. His sacrifice dealt with all sin for all time for all who believe in Him. His death reached back and dealt with the sin of OT saints whose faith rested in the promise of His coming; and it reached forward to save all those who trust is in His death and resurrection to deal with their sin. It is a once for all sacrifice, ending any further need for sacrifice.

Third, Jesus’ suffered as our substitute. Jesus was just in the sight of God, while sinners are unjust. Yet on the cross, the just One was treated like a condemned man, so that condemned men could be treated like the just One. *Jesus bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed* (2:24). The cross is the place of a great exchange. Jesus takes our sin from us and gives us in exchange His righteousness. He drank the cup of God’s wrath so that we might be become the righteousness of God in Him.

The fourth purpose of Jesus’ suffering listed here is so that He might bring us to God. This decribes reconciliation. Sin alienates us from God, making us His enemies. It creates a chasm between God and us that we cannot span. Through His death, Jesus bridged that chasm by dealing with the offense of our sin, appeasing God’s wrath, and restoring our relationship with God. Through Christ, we gain access to the Father. The veil of sin that separated us from God has been torn in two by Christ. Through Him we gain full access to God and have all the rights privileges of being His children and co-heirs with Christ.

Vs. 18 ends by reminding us how Jesus accomplished all these things. It was through His death and resurrection. He was put to death according to the flesh. This points to His death on the cross where payment was made. But He was made alive in the spirit. This points to His resurrection, never to die again. That this is done in the spirit reminds us that Jesus’ goal was not to extend our physical life, but to give us the spiritual life necessary for eternal life in His presence. His death paid the penalty; His resurrection brings the victory. Through the tragedy of Jesus’ suffering, God accomplished the salvation of His people. When He allows suffering into our lives, it is also for our eternal good, for God causes all things, even suffering and heartbreak, to work together for good for those who love God and are called according to His purposes.

These truths demand a response. Those of us who are already right with God should have their hearts stirred with love, adoration, and worship for such an amazing Savior. These things should also encourage faithful living. Meditating of Christ’s sacrifice gives us Paul’s perspective: suffering is momentary and light when compared to the glory that awaits us in heaven.

If you have never trusted Christ, these truths are of utmost importance to you. The wages of sin is death. Those wages will be paid. The only way to escape paying them yourself to allow Jesus to take that debt on for you. He said *I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.* His salvation can be yours. Romans 10:9 says that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. I implore you to turn from your sin to trust Christ for the salvation of your soul.

I have labored long on vs. 18 because it is the main point of the text. In vs. 19, there is a shift from discussing the purpose of Christ’s suffering to discussing three things it accomplished. Although this section is rife with interpretive challenges, I want to move through it fairly quickly.

The first result of Jesus’ redeeming work is that it sealed the defeat of His enemies. After the resurrection, Jesus *went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison who were once disobedient.* The spirits in view here are angelic beings who have sinned against God. We would call them demons. Although the Bible is clear that there is a spiritual realm active around us that we cannot see, if gives us very few glimpses into how that world functions. But this verse tells us that, after His resurrection, Jesus went to these spirits and proclaimed His victory over them. This picks up on an important gospel theme. In Gen. 3, God said the Savior would crush the serpent’s head, while the serpent would bruise His heel. The cross bruised Jesus’ heel; but His resurrection crushed the serpent’s head. Satan’s inability to keep Christ in the grave was the final blow in his defeat. Jesus declared His victory to the fallen and condemned angels by His resurrection.

These should encourage people who are suffering at the hands of godless people. We may be engaged in a spiritual battle, but the war is already won. Satan is defeated, and our victory is secure. We can bear up under attack because we know our King is the Victor and will return to receive us into His presence.

The second result of Jesus’ death and resurrection is that it provides a better salvation. It is at this point we must deal with some of the controversy around this text. The question is whether the statement of vs. 20 is a commentary on the spirits in prison mentioned in vs. 19, or if it is a separate, distinct thought. The grammar in this section, particularly the function of the word translated *when* in my NASB is not the clearest.

Many people believe vs. 20 tells us when these spirits Christ proclaimed His triumph over were place in prison. They believe it happened in the days of Noah. They point to Gen. 6:2 when the “sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful; and they took wives for themselves, whomever they chose.” A long-standing interpretation of this text is that it describes the intermarrying of angels and humans. These unions produced the Nephilim, who are often viewed like the Titans of Greek mythology. Those who hold to this view believe that these fallen angels were imprisoned for their sin, and that Jesus proclaimed their final judgement to them after His resurrection. This is a common interpretation of the text; however, I view it differently.

Angels are spirit beings, which means they have a different nature that humans. Jesus says that angels neither marry nor are given in marriage. Furthermore, there is zero biblical evidence that angels procreate. Even if the did, they are spirit beings who do not have physical bodies like ours. A spirit procreating with a human would be like a dog procreating with a fish. It doesn’t happen. Yet Genesis 6 indicates these mixed marriages are the seedbed for mankind’s wholesale rejection of God. So the idea that demons intermarried with women does not make sense to me.

A better understanding for the sons of God and daughters of men is found in the flow of Genesis. Gen 4&5 contain two genealogies. One is the line of Cain, who rebelled against God, killed his brother, and persisted in his sin. The other is the line of Seth, who along with his descendants worshipped God. What you have is two people groups emerging: those who are in a right relationship with God, represented by Seth’s line; and those opposed to God, represented by Cain’s line. In the days of Noah, the godly line of Seth, the sons of God, intermarried with the ungodly daughters of Cain. The result was the corruption of God’s people that led to the massive wickedness of Noah’s day. Only Noah and his family remained faithful to God.

What does all this have to do with 1 Peter 3:20? I don’t think there is a direct connection between Peter’s comments on spirits in prison and his comments on Noah. I think there should be a semicolon between the two subjects because Peter is addressing two separate events. This is how he handles these two subjects in 2 Peter 2:4-5. There he references angels being condemned by God for sinning and the flood as separate events. The angels fallings into sin references Satan’s rebellion and the angels who joined him. Vs. 5 speaks to God’s judgment on the world in Noah’s day. Then he speaks of Sodom and Gomorrah in vs. 6; they are three separate events pointing to the single reality that God judges the wicked while also saving the righteous.

The flood narrative is often used as the ultimate OT example of God’s judgment on sin and salvation of His people. God was patient with sinners in the days of Noah while he built the ark. 2 Peter 2:5 tells us that not only was Noah busy constructing the ark as a means of salvation from God’s coming wrath, but that he was also preaching to the lost. He told people of God’s coming judgment and how only those who entered through the single door of the ark would be saved.

God did save the eight people who entered the ark. The emphasis of the flood narrative is not the destruction of the wicked. That is just the backdrop against which God’s salvation plan played out. The ark pictured Christ. He is the one door through whom we pass to escape the deluge of God’s wrath. He did this as He hung on a cross of wood. This is why vs. 19-20 point to the better salvation Christ accomplished. The ark saved Noah from the flood, but it did not deal with his sin problem. He still needed sacrifice, and he still struggled with sin. He was left looking for a better Savior who provides a better salvation. He was left looking for Christ.

Vs. 21 brings this point home by turning our attention to Christ. The salvation Noah experienced in the ark corresponds to the Christian’s experience of salvation. The believer’s baptism into Christ saves them. There are two kinds of baptism mentioned in the NT. The first refers to our faith-union with Christ in His death and resurrection. The second refers to water baptism when we publicly declare our faith in Christ. One is a spiritual baptism; the other is a physical baptism that pictures the spiritual one.

Peter has the spiritual baptism in mind here, for he says he is not talking about the removal of dirt from the flesh; rather, he is referring to our union with Christ *when we appeal to God for a good conscience.* The bible teaches that believers are united to Christ in His death and resurrection. In the same way we died in Adam when he sinned, we died to sin in Christ, the second Adam when He died on the cross. When He rose from the grave, we rose with Him to live for God. Water baptism pictures this spiritual baptism into Christ through faith. We gain a clean conscience, not by being baptized in water, but through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. His saving work is applied to us when we appeal to God for it. He forgives our sins, gives us a new nature, a new heart, and a new desire to live for Him. His is a better salvation.

Finally, see that the salvation Jesus provides is complete. Having risen from the dead, Jesus is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him. Jesus returned to heaven a victor, having accomplished all that He came to do on earth. He is seated at the right hand of the Father because His saving work is done. There is no work left for Him to do, and there is no work we must do. All our foes, whether angels, authorities, or powers, have been subjected to Him. Salvation is complete. When the Father gives the word, He will return for His people, that where He is, there we may be also. He has prepared the rooms in His Father’s house; He is just waiting for the last of His people to come through the door of salvation. His salvation is superior to all others, for it is the only way we can be reconciled to God.

I know today’s sermon has been a more technical than usual. I have barely scratched the surface of the challenges of interpreting this text. Yet despite the complexity, the main point is clear. Jesus died our death for us, offering Himself as a once-for-all sacrifice. He, the innocent one, stood condemned in our place so that He might bring us to God. His arms are stretched wide, ready to receive anyone who appeals to Him for a good conscience. So come, find rest for your weary soul. Be free from the burden of sin and be reconciled to God. May we love, worship, and adore Him for providing such an amazing salvation.