

The Triumph of Christ's Suffering, Part 2

Scripture: 1 Peter 3:18–20

Code: 60-37

INTRODUCTION

The suffering of Christ on the cross was both His greatest humiliation and greatest triumph. The apostle Peter wrote his first epistle to encourage believers undergoing severe persecutions and trials. He pointed to Christ as the supreme example of the triumph that comes through suffering in the will of God.

First Peter 3:18-22 says that Christ "also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water. And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you--not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience--through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him."

The thrust of that key passage is its beginning, "Christ . . . died," and ending, "Angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him." Peter's message is that though we might suffer unjustly and severely as our Lord did, God will provide victory in the end. Verses 18-22 highlight the triumph of Christ's bearing the sins of humanity, declaring His victory to the enemy, saving His people from destruction, and reigning supreme over all.

REVIEW

I. THE TRIUMPH OF DECLARING VICTORY TO THE ENEMY (v. 18a)

"Christ . . . died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God."

LESSON

II. THE TRIUMPH OF DECLARING VICTORY TO THE ENEMY (vv. 18b-20)

"[Christ was] put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah."

A. The Condition of Christ's Spirit (v. 18b)

"[Christ was] put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit."

1. The death of His flesh

The phrase "put to death in the flesh" means that Christ's physical life ceased. Some dispute the resurrection of Christ from the dead by claiming that He never died but only fainted. Supposedly He was revived by the coolness of His tomb, got up, and walked out. But Peter is clear: Jesus was dead--the victim of a judicial murder.

The term Peter used (Gk. , thanato[ma]o) means "to die." Thanatology is the study of death. Beyond that basic meaning, the word also carries the connotation of violence. Here it emphasizes the suffering associated with the violent death of Christ.

Christ's Roman executioners were sure He was dead. They broke the legs of the thieves crucified alongside Him to hasten their deaths (a victim of crucifixion could postpone death as long as he

could elevate himself on his legs). However, they didn't bother to break Christ's legs since they could see He was already dead. to quickly that they pierced His side, out of which came a flow of blood and water (John 19:31-37). Christ was surely dead.

2. The life of His spirit

The phrase "made alive in the spirit" refers to the life of Jesus' spirit--not to the Holy Spirit. There's no article in the Greek text indicates that Peter was referring to the Holy Spirit. Rather, he seems to be contrasting what happened to the flesh (or body) of Jesus with what happened to His spirit. His spirit was alive but His flesh was dead.

Some think "made alive in the spirit" refers to Christ's resurrection, but that would necessitate a statement like, "He was put to death in the flesh but made alive in the flesh." The resurrection was a spiritual and physical occurrence. Thus Peter's point has to be that though Christ was physically dead, His spirit was still alive.

Though in spirit Christ was alive, He did experience spiritual death--not cessation of existence but separation from God. On the cross He said, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" (Matt. 27:46). That shows the separation He temporarily experienced from the Father when He was made sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21). Similarly, unbelievers experience spiritual death (separation from God) in this life and eternal death in the next, but they never cease to exist.

The separation between Christ and the Father was over quickly, for shortly after our Lord's lament He said, "Father, into Thy hands I commit My spirit" (Luke 23:46). That shows His spirit was alive again--no longer separated from God--and could be committed to the Father.

B. The Journey Christ Made (v. 19a)

"In which also He went."

After the crucifixion Christ's body was laid in a tomb. "In which also" points to what happened to Christ's living spirit. While Christ's body lay in the tomb, He went in His spirit to another place. The Greek verb translated "He went" (poreuomai) refers to going from one place to another (cf. v. 22). Unlike the spirits of the unrighteous, who immediately experience the wrath of God after death, the spirit of Christ was able to accomplish God's perfect purpose.

C. The Proclamation Christ Gave (v. 19b)

"[He] made proclamation."

Christ went to preach a triumphant sermon before His resurrection Sunday morning. The verb translated "made proclamation" (k[ma]eruss[ma]o) refers to making a proclamation or announcing a triumph. In ancient times a herald would proceed generals and kings in the celebration of military victories, announcing to all the victories won in battle. That's what Jesus went to do--not to preach the gospel (Gk. , euangeliz[ma]o, "to evangelize") but to announce His triumph over sin, death, hell, demons, and Satan. He didn't go to win souls but to proclaim victory to the enemy in spite of the unjust suffering they subjected Him to.

D. The Audience of Christ's Proclamation (v. 19c)

"[He proclaimed] to the spirits."

1. Were they angels or men?

Verse 20 speaks of "persons" (Gk. , psuchai, "souls") while verse 19 speaks of "spirits" (pneumasin). Peter was referring to two different kinds of beings: human beings in verse 20 and spirit beings or angels in verse 19. Another thing indicating that verse 19 doesn't refer to human beings is that the New Testament never uses "spirits" to refer to humans except when qualified by a genitive (e. g. , Hebrews 12:23, which reads "to the spirits of righteous men").

A final clue for determining that verse 19 refers to angels is that verse 22 says Jesus "is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him." "Angels and authorities and powers" all refer to angelic beings.

The angels Jesus made proclamation to were not just any angels--they were demons said to be "in prison" (v. 19). That shows Jesus wasn't preaching a message of salvation, since demons can't be

saved: they're damned forever. As Hebrews 2:16 says, "[Christ] does not give help to angels, but He gives help to the descendant of Abraham."

2. Why did Christ preach to them?

Christ proclaimed victory over the enemy. Since beginning of time Satan and his cohorts have been at war with God. We see that cosmic conflict reflected many times in Scripture (e. g. , Job 1; Daniel 10:13). After Satan's apparent triumph in bringing about the Fall of mankind, God predicted his eventual destruction by the Messiah, who would triumph ultimately in spite of a seeming setback (Gen. 3:15). As a result Satan attempted to destroy the Messianic line by destroying God's people. When that failed he tried to slaughter the infant Messiah (Matt. 2:16-18). When that didn't work he attempted to corrupt the Messiah (Matt. 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13). Failure in that attempt caused him to instigate mobs to kill Him. He even tried to make sure the Messiah couldn't come forth from the tomb. It's been said that hell must have been in the midst of its carnival when He arrived. They were probably celebrating the victory they had tried so hard to secure--but were abruptly disappointed.

E. The Imprisonment of Christ's Audience (v. 19d)

"[He proclaimed] in prison."

Scripture never describes the souls of dead men as being in prison. Yet these spirits or angels are in a specific location: a phulak[ma]e or place of imprisonment.

Not all demons are imprisoned. There are two kinds of angels: holy angels and fallen angels (demons). There are two kinds of demons: those who are bound and those who are not. Of the bound demons there are two kinds: those temporarily bound and those permanently bound. Jesus went to where those permanently bound are imprisoned.

What We Struggle Against

Ephesians 6:12 says, "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places." That's the struggle believers have against demons who aren't bound. Luke 8:31 says that the demons in a man named Legion (many demons were in him) "were entreating Him [Jesus] not to command them to depart into the abyss." Matthew 8:29 records that they said, "What do we have to do with You, Son of God? Have You come here to torment us before the time?" The demons who are free are terrified of the judgment that awaits them.

F. The Sin of Christ's Audience (v. 20a)

"[They] once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah."

1. They overstepped their bounds

The demons to whom Christ proclaimed victory had been disobedient during the time of Noah. They were sent to prison because they overstepped the bounds established for them by God.

The Sermon of the Ark

God commanded Noah to build an ark--a great boat (Gen. 6:13-17). While it did serve to rescue Noah and his family through the judgment of the Flood, its main purpose was to serve as a sermon. It took 120 years to build, and all that time it served as an object lesson of the impending judgment of God. Yet none but Noah's family heeded the warning of the ark, and all drowned but them.

The wickedness of Noah's day shows the lack of responsiveness to the sermon of the ark. Genesis 6:5 says, "The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." It was a time of great demonic activity, prompting God to drown the whole earth.

2. Their sin was well known

The specific sin committed by the bound demons must have been well known to Peter's readers since Peter's mention of it is so cursory. He would otherwise have gone into greater detail to explain what he was talking about.

Second Peter 2:4-5 refers to those demons in a cursory way: "God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment; and did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a preacher of righteousness, with seven others, when He brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly." The following verse refer to the condemnation of Sodom and Gomorrah (vv. 6-8). Each of those occurrences are described in Genesis (Gen. 6, 18-19) and it is logical to assume that both occurrences involved the same sin.

How Come Peter's Readers Knew so Much About Fallen Angels?

The phrase translated "cast them into hell" in 2 Peter 2:4 is the Greek verb tartaro[ma]o, which means "to consign to Tartarus." According to classical Greek mythology, Tartarus is the subterranean abyss in which rebellious gods are punished. It was adopted in Judaism to describe the prison of fallen angels.

Tartarus is also mentioned in the pseudepigraphal book of Enoch (Enoch 20:2), a familiar book to Jewish people of New Testament times. The epistle of Jude refers to it (Jude 14; cf. Enoch 1:9). The book of Enoch indicates that certain angels overstepped their bounds, referring to their sin in the same way Peter's letters do. Apparently Peter knew his audience was aware of the book of Enoch, so he had only to mention the fall of the angels and their incarceration in Tartarus for his readers to know exactly what he was talking about.

3. They went after "strange flesh"

The epistle of Jude says the "angels who did not keep their own domain, but abandoned their proper abode, He [God] has kept in eternal bonds under darkness for the judgment of the great day. Just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them, since they in the same way as these indulged in gross immorality and went after strange flesh, are exhibited as an example, in undergoing the punishment of eternal fire" (6-7). That describes the eternal incarceration of angels who overstepped their bounds, and also specifies the kind of sin they committed: the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah--going after "strange flesh."

In Sodom and Gomorrah homosexuality was rampant. When angels visited Lot (Gen. 19), the homosexual men of Sodom came to his house and tried to break in and rape the angels. Even when struck blind by the angels, the men were so crazed with lust that they still tried to get to the angels. Whatever the angels who are bound in Tartarus did, it was similar to that sin.

Genesis 6:1-4 says, "When men began to multiply on the face of the land, and daughters were born to them . . . the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful; and they took wives for themselves, whomever they chose. Then the Lord said, 'My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, because he also is flesh; nevertheless his days shall be one hundred and twenty years.' The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men, and they bore children to them. Those were the mighty men who were of old, men of renown."

That's a description of demons who assumed human form and cohabitated with women, producing a demon hybrid race. That race may have been the Nephilim mentioned in Genesis 6:4. Nephilim is derived from the Hebrew verb naphal, which means "to fall." It can refer to those who are violent, and in Numbers 13:33 refers to people of great size. Genesis 6:4 describes them as "mighty men" and "men of renown." So apparently that hybrid race was powerful, large, and violent.

4. They attempted to thwart God's plan of salvation

The race produced through the sin of the bound demons was unredeemable. That's because Christ, the God/man, came to save man--not demon man. That sin was a deliberate attempt to corrupt the

entire human race and thwart the plan of salvation. As a result it was necessary to destroy the whole earth with water to prevent total corruption of the human race.

What About Those "Sons of God" in Genesis 6?

Some think the "sons of God" mentioned in Genesis 6 refers to the descendants of Seth, a son of Adam (Gen. 5:3). They say the text is describing the intermingling of believers (the descendants of Seth) and non-believers. But there are a number of reasons that the phrase "sons of God" is better understood as a reference to fallen angels (or demons):

1. It is the oldest view and was widely held in antiquity (see Gordon J. Wenham, Genesis 1-15, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1 (Waco: Word Books, 1987), p. 139).
2. The specific phrase "sons of God" (Heb. , bene haelohim) always refers to angels in its other Old Testament usages.
3. Some manuscripts of the Greek Old Testament (the Septuagint) translate bene haelohim as "angels."
4. The specific phrase "sons of God" is always used to refer to those brought directly into being by God--not those who are procreated through human birth.
5. The early church held this view until the fourth century [sc]A. D.
6. If the phrase "sons of God" refers only to Sethites, all Sethites must have been male since they are said to have taken wives from the "daughters of men" (Gen. 6:2).
7. If the phrase "sons of God" only refers to men, it would have been simpler to say that the sons of men took wives from the daughters of men.
8. If the "sons of God" were believers, they also perished in the Flood, and that would contradict 2 Peter 2:5.
9. If only human intermarriage is in view here, it is difficult to understand why that brought on such fearful judgment (the Flood), especially since there is no condemnation of marriage between believers and non-believers in Genesis 1-6.

Conclusion

The demons who overstepped their bounds have been in prison a long time. When Jesus died on the cross, perhaps they thought He had been robbed of the keys to their prison--but He hadn't. Instead He appeared before them personally and proclaimed His triumph.

Colossians 2:15 says, "When [God] had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through [Christ]." I believe that's referring to the same thing 1 Peter 3:19-20 refers to. At the cross Jesus experienced unjust suffering and terrible persecution. Yet through it He bore the sins of humanity and then went to preach His triumph over sin, Satan, hell, demons, and death. What an example of passing through suffering to triumph!

Focusing on the Facts

1. Why did the apostle Peter write his first epistle?
2. What's the thrust 1 Peter 3:18-22? What's the overall message?
3. Did Christ really die a physical death on the cross? Explain.
4. What does the phrase "made alive in the spirit" refer to (1 Peter 3:18)?
5. In what sense did Christ experience spiritual death?
6. Unlike the spirits of the unrighteous, who immediately experience the wrath of God after death, the spirit of Christ was able to _____.
7. What did Christ go to do before His resurrection Sunday morning?
8. To whom did Christ speak in 1 Peter 3:19?
9. Where did He speak?
10. Why was Jesus' audience where they were?

11. What was the main purpose of the ark built by Noah?
12. How could Peter's readers have known so much about what he described in 1 Peter 3:20?
13. What was the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah for which those described in 1 Peter 3:20 were imprisoned?
14. What does Genesis 6:1-4 indicate about the sin of those described in 1 Peter 3:20? What was the result of that sin?
15. Who were the "sons of God" in Genesis?

Pondering the Principles

1. The death of Christ on behalf of sinners was an act of grace. British theologian A. W. Pink wrote how helpful it was for him to realize that "grace is something more than 'unmerited favor.' 'To feed a tramp who calls on me is 'unmerited favor,' but it is scarcely grace. But suppose that after he has robbed me I should feed this starving tramp--that would be 'grace.' 'Grace, then, is favour shown where there is positive de-merit in the one receiving it" (The Sovereignty of God, revised ed. [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1961], p. 25). Christ did not die for sinful angels but He did die for sinful men and women. Be grateful that "while we were still helpless at the right time Christ died for the ungodly" (Rom. 5:6).

2. In his hymn "And Can It Be that I Should Gain," Charles Wesley wrote,
'Tis mystery all! Th' Immortal dies!

Who can explore His strange design?

In vain the first born seraph tries

To sound the depths of love divine!

'Tis mercy all! let earth adore,

Let angel minds inquire no more.

It was lost man whom Christ bled for--the lost angels could only listen in dismay to Christ's proclamation of victory. Unlike fallen mankind, the fallen angels cannot participate in the atoning work of Christ, and the elect angels can only marvel at what they cannot fully understand (1 Pet. 1:12). Take time now to praise God for making you a man or woman--and not an angel--who can participate in the work of Christ on the cross!

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