

In the Land of our Sojourn: A Baptism That Saves

1 Peter 3:18-22

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on September 28, 2014

Introduction

- ❖ I think it goes without saying that you're going to come across difficult passages in Scripture. But as I've explained before, there are two types of difficult passages. There are those passages that are fairly easy to understand but hard to accept (to obey). And then there are those passages that are difficult because they're truly obscure. They're hard to understand.
 - Now they were likely much clearer to their original audience, but that's because ancient readers had a better grasp of the cultural and contextual nuances in the text. So as modern readers we're at a bit of a disadvantage. But that doesn't excuse us from ignoring or passing over these passages just because they're obscure.

- ❖ No, as Christians we believe that "*all Scripture is breathed out by God*" (2 Tim. 3:16), and that includes difficult, obscure passages like ours today. **And we believe that all Scripture is "useful for teaching", but that's not to say that all of it is easy to use.** It's going to take some work. But it's worth it. Because I'm convinced this passage is very useful in equipping you for every good work (2 Tim. 3:17).
 - And just as an aside, this is why we value the normal practice of expository preaching through whole books of the Bible. Because it forces a congregation and a preacher to confront passages that we would rather avoid. Again, either because it's a teaching too hard to swallow or too hard to explain. But if we're just walking through books of the Bible, then we have to deal with whatever inspired passage is in front of us and to humbly submit our lives to its truthfulness and authority over us.

- ❖ Well today's passage definitely presents that sort of challenge. This passage is arguably the most widely debated in all Scripture with the most variants of possible interpretations, and the differences stems all the way back to the earliest days of the church.
 - Martin Luther, the 16th-century Reformer, who was usually opinionated and rather dogmatic about his interpretations of Scripture, was forced to admit, "*This is a strange text and certainly a more obscure passage than any other passage in the New Testament. I still do not know for sure what the apostle meant.*"

- ❖ So it would be presumptuous of me to think that I've unraveled all the mystery. That I have *the* interpretation. I'll definitely share what I believe to be the strongest, but I don't want to turn this moment into a lecture on the interpretive history of this passage.
 - When I preach, one of my primary aims is to shine light on Scripture. But I don't see myself just giving you a flashlight to help you navigate the Bible. **When I preach, I aim to give you a blazing torch.** Yes, to give you light to help you see what's in front of you in the text but also to warm your heart. A torch gives both light and heat. Preaching likewise should be aimed at giving you a *feeling* sense of the text that you might not just understand it but love it and seek to live out its truth.
 - Friends, I really want to hand you a torch. So what I propose is that before we get to the interpretive difficulties of this passage, into the details, let's take a step back and try to see the forest for the trees.

Seeing the Forest for the Trees

- ❖ Let's try to grasp the big picture. Even though people differ on the details, I think the central theme of this passage is fairly clear and uncontroversial. So instead of jumping in too quick and getting lost among the trees, let's step back and look at the entire forest. Let me help you recall the context of our passage and then to recognize its central theme.
- ❖ As we've gone through 1 Peter, we've noted that the central refrain is that Christians are "*sojourners and exiles*" in this world (2:11; 1:1, 17). That's our identity in the eyes of society. We have to accept this reality otherwise we won't understand why we face trials (1:7), why we suffer unjustly (2:19), why we suffer for doing good (3:17), why we're maligned (4:4) or insulted (4:14). Why don't people get us?
 - **When these fiery trials come upon us it's quite surprising (4:12) unless we realize that this is what it means to be a Christian.** That this is what we're called to. We're called to be sojourners and exiles. We're called to suffer, to suffer unjustly. This is the example, the pattern, that Christ left for us that we might follow in his steps (2:21).
- ❖ **And the reason Peter writes this letter, as he says in chapter 5:12, is to encourage his readers to endure, to hold on, to persevere in spite of suffering.** He says, "*I have written briefly to you, exhorting and declaring that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it.*"
 - Stand firm in God's grace. Endure. Persevere. That's Peter's point. In the verses right before our passage, he says in v14, "*But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed.*" Have no fear. Don't be troubled. And in v17 he says, "*it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.*" (3:17) And he goes immediately into our passage.
 - So regardless of all the different interpretations, this one thing is clear: **Whatever Peter is teaching here, he intends for it to support his bold claim that suffering for doing good, for the sake of righteousness, is a blessed, better thing.** Suffering as a Christian for Christ is a good thing.
- ❖ It's so natural for us to treat all suffering as something bad. We're all pain-averse. No one likes to suffer. And so when we do – even for doing good and not as a consequence of our sin or folly – we still tend to feel defeated. We feel like Christians shouldn't be suffering. We should be living victorious lives. *What's wrong here? Is something wrong with my faith?*
 - Peter's answer is No. Don't be discouraged just because you're suffering, especially when you suffer unjustly as a Christian. ***Why? Why should we view this kind of suffering as a blessed, better thing?***
- ❖ Look at v18. "*For [because] 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.*" **In other words, the reason why your unjust suffering for the sake of Christ is blessed and better is because Christ suffered unjustly for your sake, for your sins, to bring you to God.** And his suffering, his death in the flesh, was not the final word. It was not a defeat. It was a prelude to victory – to his victorious resurrection and ascension.

- ❖ So you see the context of our passage is all about suffering unjustly, but now the central theme of the passage is getting clearer. It's actually not about suffering, not even about Jesus' suffering. It's about his victory. **The central theme is about Jesus' victory and the victory of all those who are baptized into him.** Those baptized into his death are also raised with him to walk in newness of life, to experience the sweetness of his victory (Rom. 6:4).
 - So just as the suffering of Christ was not the final word but the prelude to victory, so too the suffering of Christians for Christ is a prelude to sharing in his victory. When you see this truth and get its implications, it's life-changing. The suffering, opposition, and persecution you'll face in this life as a Christian, as a sojourner and exile, will now be viewed and reacted to in a completely different light.

- ❖ I just imagine what it would've been like to be a soldier in Israel's army back in 1 Samuel 17. You're standing on one side of a mountain overlooking a valley with the entire Philistine army on the other side of another mountain directly across. Your champion, a young shepherd boy who recently showed up at camp, is now going out to meet the Philistine's champion, a seasoned warrior and a giant of a man.
 - The rules are clear. The two champions will fight it out on behalf of their respective armies. **If your champion wins, then his victory is a victory for all of you.** But if your champion loses, then his defeat is your defeat. You'll be enslaved to the enemy.
 - Clearly it's nerve-racking. The stakes are so high, and everything is riding on a simple shepherd. It's all up to him. Now your first thought is to worry. The odds seem stacked against your champion. But in a surprising turn of events, he ends up victorious standing over his fallen enemy.

- ❖ And then you hear a resounding shout of victory on your side. The trumpets suddenly blare and the battle cry is issued. You and everyone around you rushes down into the valley and up the other side in hot pursuit of a retreating army. The battle is won. Victory is yours.
 - So imagine if you were an Israelite soldier pursuing the enemy. They're defeated, but they'll still put up a fight. You still need to subdue them. There is going to be some individual battles. You'll probably get scraped up. You might have a few wounds and bruises to show. You can call it suffering, but in the bigger picture it's nothing to you because you know your champion has won and you have the victory!
 - **But fighting those individual battles would be completely different if victory was still up for grabs.** If victory still depends on you and your fellow man, you would be racked with fear. You wouldn't stand firm. You couldn't endure the suffering. You'd be tempted to retreat, to run and hide your face.

- ❖ ***Do you see how monumental it is to run into battle, right into the thick of things, knowing that your champion has already won and the victory is already yours?*** It makes all the difference in the world. This is what Peter is trying to get at.
 - This whole time, starting back in chapter 2:13, Peter has been telling his readers to subject themselves to the various authorities over their lives even if they exploit you and mistreat you. Even if it means having to endure sorrows while suffering unjustly.

- ❖ And now at the end of v22, Peter brings up subjection once more. But this time it's not Christians or even Christ being subjected to authorities. No, this time it's Christ doing the subjecting. V22 says Jesus has now *"gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him."*
 - Do you see his point? **You can stand firm, you can subject yourself to authorities and endure any unjust suffering at their hands.** *Why?* Not because you think it's up to you and that victory is still up for grabs. But because you know that your champion has already won and subjected all authorities and powers under his feet.

- ❖ I know some of you are experiencing various degrees of unjust suffering, suffering for doing good as a Christian. Many of you are being teased or ridiculed for your Christian convictions, for holding to biblical values. Ironically you're the one being insulted and called "hateful" or "intolerant"; "ignorant" or "brainwashed". Perhaps you have or you now risk losing opportunities to advance your career or other ambitions, if you were open about your faith. All of this would be unjust suffering and none of it feels good in itself.
 - But when you view it all in the big picture, in light of your champion and his victory, it really changes things. Suffering did not have the final say over Jesus. He rose. He conquered. He won. **And all Christians – all who have been baptized into Christ – share in that victory and can take comfort in knowing that their present suffering is not the final word.**

Examining Those Obscure Trees

- ❖ That's the central theme of our passage. That's the forest. Let's get that clear. Let's center on that message. Only then are we ready to more closely examine some of the rather obscure trees in this forest. Let me read vv18-20 again,
 - *"¹⁸For 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, ¹⁹in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, ²⁰because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water."*

- ❖ **The difficulty of this passage has to do with identifying the who, what, where, when, and how of vv19-20.** Who are these *"spirits in prison"*? What did they do to be put in prison? Where did Jesus go in order to proclaim to them and when did he go? What message did he proclaim? How or in what manner did he do it? And what does all this have to do with Noah and the ark? Like I said, it's quite confounding and I won't pretend to have all the answers. But I will lay out for you the three most common interpretations.

- ❖ The first one has to do with an old theological concept called the **"Harrowing of Hell"**. The idea is that, between his crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus descended into hell to proclaim the gospel to all the OT saints who were long dead. Another variation of this view narrows the preaching specifically to the sinful human beings who perished in Noah's flood. Jesus goes down to offer these "spirits" another chance to repent and be saved.

- ❖ This view was developed by some early Christian theologians (i.e. Clement of Alexandria, Origen, St. Cyril). It came in response to answering tough questions like, “How can OT saints be redeemed by Christ if they died centuries before? And where was Jesus and what was he doing on Saturday between Good Friday and Easter?”
 - This idea of Jesus descending into hell even worked its way into the Apostle’s Creed. **So this interpretation has a long history, but it also has its share of textual and theological problems.**

- ❖ For example, the word for “spirits” (*pneumasin*) is used almost exclusively in the NT to refer to supernatural beings and not human beings, even the deceased. And the word for “prison” (*phylake*) is never used to refer to the place of the dead. The Bible normally speaks of Hades, Tartarus, or Sheol. These are such some of the textual problems.
 - **But the biggest problem is theological and it has to do with the possibility for postmortem conversion – having a second chance to be saved after death while in hell.** That not only contradicts clear teaching elsewhere (Heb. 9:27; Lk. 16:26), but more importantly it makes no sense within the very context of 1 Peter.
 - Peter’s whole point is to exhort readers to endure suffering to the end knowing that judgment is coming (1:7, 17; 2:12) and they’ll be rewarded for their faithfulness. But his pleas to persevere would make no sense if he thought there was a second chance in your next life if you failed to stand firm in this one.

- ❖ So from early on, ancient theologians saw the troubling implications of this interpretation and sought for another. Enter St. Augustine. **He saw the passage referring – not to something that Jesus did between Good Friday and Easter or even post-resurrection – but to the pre-incarnate Christ preaching through Noah to sinners in the flood generation.**
 - In other words, back in Genesis when Noah preached a message of repentance to those around mocking him, disobeying God and trying his patience, it was actually the Spirit of Christ preaching through him.

- ❖ Now if that’s true, the question remains: *Why would Peter bring this up? What is he hoping to accomplish by pointing back to Noah’s story?* **He’s drawing a comparison between Noah’s experience and that of his readers.** Think about it. Noah and his family were a persecuted minority. They faced unjust suffering. And yet God was faithful to saved them.
 - I’m sure Noah’s story held a certain appeal for Peter’s readers. They too felt like a persecuted minority, so it would’ve been quite encouraging to draw a comparison to the divine rescue that Noah and his family experienced.

- ❖ Now I’m aware that this interpretation has a long backing through Augustine, Aquinas, and some of the Reformers. But I think it still has its share of textual difficulties. So though it’s certainly a plausible interpretation of the text, but I don’t think it’s the strongest. For that we turn to the third most common interpretation.

- ❖ **It's the view that Jesus – post-resurrection and perhaps during his ascension – declared victory over all the forces of evil when he specifically went and proclaimed victory to a batch of evil spirits who represent the worst of the worst.** After evaluating the various positions, I come away convinced that this interpretation does the most justice to the original language and makes the most sense grammatically as well as contextually.
 - But I'm sure you're wondering who are these evil spirits? This is where things get a little tricky because we get most of our information to answer that question comes from an extra-biblical book called 1 Enoch. It was never recognized by Jews as part of the OT canon, but it was a well-known book and likely known to Peter's readers.

- ❖ In it, Enoch speaks of these figures called the Watchers – fallen angels who abandoned heaven and bore offspring with human women (alluding to Genesis 6:2-4). Their children are said to be the cause of all the human evil and injustice that eventually triggered the great flood. So their punishment was a perpetual imprisonment on earth, never being allowed to ascend back to heaven.
 - Some of you might be thinking, "Wow this is starting to sound a lot like Darren Aronofsky's *Noah* movie and those rock monsters." Well yes, the director did pull from 1 Enoch as one of his sources.
 - And this might surprise you but NT authors did the same. In Jude v6 and vv14-15, we see direct references to 1 Enoch. And another reference shows up in 2 Peter 2:4 of all places. So if Peter makes use of this extra-biblical book in his second letter, there is good reason to believe he's doing the same here.

- ❖ **Peter is appealing to common knowledge of this Jewish tradition and suggesting that Jesus is the champion, the victor, over all forces of evil in both the human and spirit realms, in the natural and supernatural world.** If he was able to proclaim victory over the worst of the worst, then you can be sure that the lesser evil and opposition you're facing has likewise been subjected under that same victory and rule.
 - *Do you see how this fits the passage as a whole?* This is the kind of tree that you would expect in this kind of forest. If this is a forest about Jesus' victory, then a corresponding interpretation is definitely preferable.

Appreciating the Beauty of the Forest

- ❖ So let's draw our attention back to the forest, the big picture, and see how Peter want us to appreciate it and apply it. This is what we find in vv21-22. What Peter does here might be surprising to many of us. **To appreciate and apply Jesus' victory over all evil, he points to Christian baptism.** He says you either need to be baptized *or* to start living in light of your baptism.
 - Look at v21, "²¹*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, ²²who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.*"

- ❖ **So after referencing Noah’s ark and the flood, Peter goes on to say that Christian baptism corresponds to that event.** The word literally says that baptism is the *antitype*. In the OT, the flood event demonstrated God’s faithfulness to save his people through the waters of judgment and death. But as monumental as that event was in the OT, it was only a type, a symbol, pointing forward to baptism, which is the antitype.
 - **In Christian baptism, those who trust in God and in his Word are also saved through the waters of judgment and death.** Being submerged under water is meant to symbolize your union in Christ and into the vicarious death he died on the cross “*once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous*”. Those waters symbolize death.
- ❖ For many of us, in our minds, the water simply represents a refreshing cleansing. But Peter says it’s far more. **The waters of baptism represents a dying, a succumbing to God’s judgment of our sin.** Just picture the flood waters and all the death it brought.
 - This connection between baptism and death is often lost on us. That’s why Peter had to say explicitly that baptism is not about bodily cleansing. And that’s why Paul was surprised in Romans 6 and had to ask his readers, “*Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?*” (Rom. 6:3)
- ❖ When you got baptized, you weren’t telling everyone that your old self (your life before Jesus) just needed a nice, refreshing cleansing. No, you were telling everyone that your old self needed to die. And die it did in those waters.
 - But of course the pastor didn’t leave you underwater. Because baptism doesn’t just correspond to the flood waters of judgment. It also corresponds to the ark of salvation. Noah and his family trusted God’s promises, relied on his grace, and climbed into God’s appointed vessel and he brought them safely through judgment.
- ❖ **If you expect any hope of surviving the ultimate “flood” of judgment, you have to trust God’s promises, rely on his grace, and climb into his appointed vessel.** This time it’s not an ark; it’s a person. You have to climb into Christ. By faith, you enter into a spiritual union with Christ.
 - And just as Christ was victorious rising up from the grave, so too are you. You share in Jesus’ resurrection and in his victory over death (Rom. 6:4). That’s why you weren’t left underwater. That’s why you were raised up and walked out of the waters.
- ❖ This, by the way, is why our church practices **baptism by immersion** instead of sprinkling. I realize the proper mode of baptism has been a legitimate historical disagreement among Christians, so I don’t think any of us should be dogmatic about this.
 - But if the waters of baptism are supposed to correspond to the flood waters of judgment and death, sprinkling just doesn’t relay the message. It doesn’t capture the drama of salvation. But going under and then rising up again certainly does.
- ❖ Now when Peter says baptism saves you, that could be (and has been) misinterpreted to mean the act itself somehow confers saving grace in a sort of magical way.

- But Peter is quick to deemphasize the cleansing properties of water and to center baptism on “*an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.*” So it’s legitimate to speak of a baptism that saves *if* the one receiving baptism is appealing to God for a good conscience. That is, he’s asking God to cleanse him from his sins on the basis of what Jesus has done for him.
- ❖ **Baptism doesn’t have saving properties in itself, but it does save when the act is anchored in the death and resurrection of Christ.** That’s why it makes no sense to me when professing Christians treat baptism as something optional. I don’t get it when people speak of baptism as something they’ll get to later or when they feel closer to God or more mature in their faith.
- I don’t think they realize that Peter actually speaks of baptism as saving or that nowhere in the NT will you come across an unbaptized believer. That’s a foreign concept. Baptism is not optional, and it’s not something you put off if you have already identified with Christ, by faith, in his death and resurrection.
- ❖ **I like to compare baptism with the exchanging of rings in a wedding ceremony.** When it gets to the point in the ceremony where the couple exchanges vows before God and witnesses, theologically I think that’s the moment when two become one, when they are married in God’s eyes.
- And immediately following their covenantal vows, the couple slips rings onto their fingers. **Now there is nothing magical about putting on a wedding band.** The act itself doesn’t have conjugal properties. But it’s so intimately tied up with your marriage covenant that it makes no sense to wait a year or two before you finally exchange rings. One should occur right after the other.
 - So when the world sees me wearing a wedding band, they recognize it as a public symbol. **That ring symbolizes the vows I took that form the covenant I’m in.** It tells the world that I’m taken, that I’m in a covenant.
- ❖ As you can see, baptism function in the same way. **When I am publicly baptized, I’m telling the world that I’m taken. I’m in a covenant with Jesus.** And whenever I feel the weight of the world against me, when I’m suffering for doing good, when it’s so hard to endure, I can be like the husband who looks at his ring when faced with temptation.
- I can recall my baptism. I can remember what it stands for. I can remember the vows I made. I can remember my champion and the victory he won over evil, sin, and death – the victory in which I share. And that’s what I’ll need to stand firm in his grace.
- ❖ **If having the wherewithal to endure unjust suffering in this world as a “sojourner and exile” is important to you, then baptism should be important to you.** Perhaps some of you need to delay no further and go public with the covenant you have with Jesus. You need to subject yourself to the waters of baptism.
- Perhaps others who are baptized need to live out the reality for which it stands: Jesus is victorious and so too are all who are baptized into Him.