

“The Victory of Jesus”

February 5, 2012

Dr. Ritch Boerckel

Scriptural Foundation: 1 Peter 3:18-22, ESV

Suffering for Righteousness’ Sake

¹⁷ For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God’s will, than for doing evil.

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, ¹⁹ in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, ²⁰ because 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. 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, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

We have a two-fold challenge in this study. Our first challenge is to understand with our minds what Peter means with this paragraph. The second challenge is to practice with our lives the principles God lays out before us. Both will stretch us.

When Martin Luther, that scholarly reformer, studied this paragraph of Holy Scripture, he commented, “A wonderful text this is. A more obscure and unclear passage perhaps than any other in the New Testament, so that I do not know for certainty just what Peter means. I cannot understand and I cannot explain it, and there has been no one who has explained it.”

That is my task; to explain what Martin Luther says is impossible to explain. The big questions we address for understanding this passage are: Where did Christ go? When did He go? To whom did He speak? What did He say? What does the illustration of Noah mean?

If you read good, solid commentaries you will discover sincere, godly people offered different answers to each of these questions. The variations are so numerous; one Bible commentator calculated this passage has been given one hundred and eighty differing combinations of answers to the questions I have just set before us. Does this cause us concern as we open this text in this study? Never fear, I will give you the final, authoritative answer to those questions! Of course, I jest.

Why would we study a passage so controversial and so difficult to understand? There are a number of reasons. First, the difficult passages were given us by God just as surely as the simple passages. They were given to us to nourish and enrich our soul, and the neglect of difficult passages simply because they are difficult leads us to our loss and to Satan’s gain. Second, the difficult passages humble us in ways the simple passages do not. They make us more willing to listen to other godly men and other godly people who have God’s Spirit and who have studied and considered this passage with a view to God’s glory. These passages lead us to pay closer attention to the details of God’s Word, to take up each section and consider it carefully. This is humbling and it is good for our soul. This is the attitude we should take to every text, rather than simply reading quickly the Scripture and saying, “I know what that means,” and then flashing forward. It is good for us to be humble before Scripture to recognize God has great and deep truth for us to draw from His Word.

God desires for us to pay attention to His Word and to draw His truth out of it, rather than come to the Word, quickly read it, and then inject our truth into it. That does violence to God’s Word, so difficult texts are helpful because they humble us.

Finally, difficult texts make us slow down and be patient in our thinking. This is good. So often there are books about how to read more rapidly. When it comes to Scripture we need to learn how to read more slowly, to take our time and meditate more patiently upon the grace and the goodness of God revealed through His Word.

In these difficult texts we are not so tempted to say, “I already understand everything this passage offers,” but rather we take line-by-line and precept-by-precept. That is good Bible study in every passage. I urge you to make your minds alert to the tasks in front of us. It will require our mental energy. Let us put on our exegetical¹ glasses and our hermeneutical² thinking hats and let us listen attentively to what God’s Spirit intends for us to gain in this study.

I do not intend to offer a review of all of the various interpretations given to this text, so if you understand them differently, understand I may not even mention your particular interpretation. Instead, I am going to present conclusions I have come to at this point with a mind to heart-application. While there are many differences in understanding the details presented in this set of verses, God-centered, Gospel-believing students agree about the central message of this passage: these verses rejoice in the triumph of Jesus over God’s enemies.

In the context of 1 Peter, he is writing to suffering saints who are living in a world in which evil seems to triumph over good and it seems to do it often and pervasively. Have you ever been discouraged by the thought evil seems to be winning out in our age?

I was encouraged to read the Susan G. Koman Foundation decided to end their grants to Planned Parenthood. Planned Parenthood is this nation’s largest abortion industry. I thought to myself, as I read those headlines, “Yes! Evil is not always winning in our culture. Sometimes good confronts evil.” I was prepared to send the Susan G. Koman Foundation a nice check of support. I was so excited, but then three days later the Koman Foundation succumbed to the full court press of abortion champions and they reversed their decisions.

Does it seem as though evil triumphs over good in this world? The thought that evil triumphs over good will weaken our resolve to stand for Jesus in the face of opposition. If we give this thought room in our soul, it will cause us to begin to quake and shake, even in our faith, and Peter knows this. Peter announces, “Do not forget though the wrong seems oft so strong, Jesus is ruler is ruler yet. Jesus triumphs! Jesus wins! He is the victor. Sin and Satan, these do not win; they are defeated foes. They are cast down in disgrace and humiliation.”

I love the words to the song, “This Is My Father’s World”³,

This is my Father’s world:
Why should my heart be sad?
The Lord is King:
Let the Heavens sing!
God reigns. Let the earth be glad!

That is the mindset of the believer. When we look at our lives and we see evil triumphing, we say, “This is my Father’s world and my heart is going to ring with gladness because that is the truth.”

Peter reminds suffering Christians Jesus is exalted and triumphant over all things. To them, it does not physically appear as that is so; they are living in a world where evil is literally destroying their lives, but Peter reminds us not to despair in times of unjust suffering, in times of rejecting, in times of persecution, for these are the times when God brings triumph to our soul.

There are four demonstrations of the victory of Jesus in our lives. The first demonstration Peter refers to is Jesus triumph over sin. We have taken two studies to discuss this, but we will touch upon this briefly once again,

¹⁷ For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God’s will, than for doing evil.

¹ The study of exegesis; the critical explanation or analysis; especially, interpretation of the Scriptures. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, New College Edition, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976.

² Of hermeneutic(s); interpretive; explanatory; the science and methodology of interpretation, especially of Scriptural text. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language.

³ Maltbie D Babcock, 1858-1901.

The question the reader must ask, because their circumstance is suffering for doing good, is, “How do we know that is true, Peter?” Peter replies, in Verses 18 through 22, “We look to Jesus to find that is true. Look at the example He set; Jesus shows us suffering for doing good leads to glory and triumph. That is what happened in His life and that is what is going to happen to everyone who follows Him. Christ also suffered once for doing good. Here is my proof: Look at Christ. He, the Righteous One, suffered for the unrighteous that He might bring us to God.”

This truth is the very center of the Good News message God secures for us in Christ. When Jesus died, His suffering was because of our sin. Jesus did not suffer because of His own sin, but because of ours and our sin demands God’s just sentence of death be passed on to us. That is what that sin requires. This punishment is the eternal separation from God and from His goodness. The Bible describes the place of that punishment as a “lake of fire”⁴ and a “place of extreme torment”⁵. As long as our sin is attached to our lives, God will judge us harshly and eternally.

We will give an account of those sins connected and attached to our lives; that is an absolute truth and we will then, as our sins are attached to our lives, have no expectation other than the expectation of being cast, in the presence of God, forever and ever and ever and ever and ever. That is the Gospel truth. When Jesus died upon the cross, He died to bear our sins upon His body and bear that punishment which was ours. He died as our substitute that when we stand before God we need not have our sins attached to us. That is how we are free.

We are not free because God looks at us, with our sins still attached, and says, “Oh, I love you and I am going to look past your sin.” No, we are free because He looks at us and He sees no sin because our sin has been borne away by another. Is that not remarkable? That is the hope of the Gospel. That is redeeming love. It is our theme and it shall be until we die. We need not have our sins attached to our lives because Jesus died for sins. He died to completely remove them from our soul so when we stand before God we can stand before Him faultless and blameless. Think of that! We can stand before God as a people and as a person who has never ever committed any wrong whatsoever, not in the slightest degree. As a people who have no guilt and no blame, how can that be when we know our own soul?

Jude references this glorious aspect of the Gospel in his benediction, and it is one I pray almost every Sunday,

²⁴ Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you (faultless) before (His) presence with (exceeding) joy...

The power of Christ sanctified in us keeps us from stumbling. When we are presented before God on that Day of Judgment, Jesus Christ, our Mediator, our Substitute, our Savior presents us before the Father and He presents us as ones who are faultless and He does it with exceeding joy. He does not do it sputtering and stammering, “Well, they are faultless. Please accept them that way.” No, He does it with exceeding joy because He bore our sins and He has gained victory.

Jesus' suffering then brings us to God, Peter says. This is the chief end of our existence, that we would enjoy God forever and ever and bring Him glory. That is what the work of the cross of Jesus does for us; that is what He accomplishes.

The question you must ask your life, individually, is: Will Jesus present me before the presence of His glory as one who is faultless? Do you know that to be true of your life? Or, will you stand before God, as one guilty of sin, with your sins? It is your relationship with Jesus which makes all the difference. Jesus triumphs over sin. He triumphs over death. He triumphs over the condemnation sin places upon your life. He triumphs over the guilt, the shame, and the judgment attached. He triumphs over all those things.

I have had many opportunities to speak at rescue missions. We ask the men, whose lives have been weighed down by sin, what song they would like to sing. They will always reply, “Victory in Jesus”⁶. They know sin is defeating them, but they want to sing and they want to have a hope there is some place for victory, some place where they can be free of sin’s power and its crushing guilt, free of their defeats and their failings. Friends, how good it is to know Jesus demonstrated suffering does not end in defeat, but it is through His suffering He triumphs over sin and death.

⁴ Revelation 20:10

⁵ Luke 16:28

⁶ Eugene Bartlett, 1939.

I heard an old, old story
How a Savior came from glory
How He gave His life on Calvary
To save a wretch like me
I heard about His groaning
Of His precious blood's atoning
Then I repented of my sins
And won the victory

O victory in Jesus
My Savior, forever
He sought me and bought me
With His redeeming blood
He loved me ere I knew Him
And all my love is due Him
He plunged me to victory
Beneath the cleansing flood

The principle we learn from this is: just as Jesus gained triumph by way of suffering for us, so our suffering for Him becomes our point of triumph. Our suffering for righteousness is our path to glory. Do you know Him? Is Jesus your substitute? Has He borne your sins?

The second demonstration of victory is Jesus' proclamation to the bound demons. At the end of Verse 18, He says, "being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit." This simply means Jesus physically died upon the cross. He did not half die. He did not swoon. He did not go into a semi-conscious coma and then was later revived in the coolness of the tomb. His physical life ceased to be. The Gospel writers record such details so as to make that very apparent, but then He was "made alive in the spirit." I think the English Standard Version has this right in using a small "s" to describe this spirit. It is not the Holy Spirit, but it is Jesus' spirit.

I believe this means Jesus' body was separated from His spirit on the cross at his physical death, and on the cross there was a time in which Jesus died in His spirit, but then there was a time, immediately, before Jesus suffered physical death His spirit was made alive. Think about that for a moment. When did Jesus' spirit die? I believe there is good evidence Jesus died spirit ally. That is the reason why Jesus cried out on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken Me?"⁷

Death is never annihilation and it is never the cessation of existence. Death is only separation. Physical death is the separation of one's body from one's soul. One does not cease to be when one dies physically. Their soul is transported somewhere, either up to the glory of God to rejoice in God, or away from God's presence.

What is spiritual death? It is a separation, not an annihilation of the spirit or the cessation of existence, of one's spirit from God and from His life. There was a time upon the cross, and it happened on the cross, in which Jesus' spirit was separated from the Father; He suffered spiritual death. But, He was made alive in the Spirit. When did that happen? I had to happen sometime before He breathed His last. How do we know that? We know that from a number of words Jesus said. He said, "It is finished! It is completed!"⁸ And then what did Jesus say to the thief on the cross, "This day you will be with me in paradise."⁹ The spirit is not separated from God in paradise. He goes onto to say, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."¹⁰ Those were His last words.

He has the spirit which was still made alive and He is commending this made-alive spirit into the Father's hands. This is what Peter is talking about; He was put to death in the flesh, but He was made alive in the Spirit. Peter's point is this separation of Jesus' spirit from God did not last long. Jesus conquered sin. When sin takes hold of our lives and kills our spirit, it does so eternally. That is why we must never, as human beings, suffer spiritual death because there is no hope when that happens.

⁷ Matthew 27:46

⁸ John 19:30

⁹ Luke 23:43

¹⁰ Luke 23:46

Jesus suffered spiritual death for us, but was He conquered? Did sin hold Him like it holds us? No, Jesus was made alive in His spirit. He gained victory over sin. It did not hold Him captive. He re-established the joy of fellowship and communion with the Father. When did this take place? Again, I believe it is right before He breathed His last.

What did Jesus do during the time when His body was dead, but His spirit was alive, those three days? Peter answers that question,

¹⁹ ...in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, ²⁰ because they formerly did not obey...

First, Peter wants us to know to whom He went; He went to the spirits in prison. The spirits used in the New Testament, without any qualifying words, exclusively refers to angels. That is the dominant reference point of this term when it is used without qualification. I believe these spirits in prison are fallen angels. Notice the angels are in view at the end of Verse 22, "with the angels, authorities, and powers have been subjected."

At the beginning of Creation, Satan led a large of multitude of angels, created beings, to rebel against the Sovereign God of the Universe. Most of the angels remained loyal and faithful to God, but Satan and his minions, in rebellion against God, were thrown out of Heaven. Since that day, Satan and his demonic realm have been allowed the opportunity to labor against God's glory. We feel that in our lives. He labors against God's people, God's work, and God's glory. All he cares about doing is destroying God's glory in our lives. That is why Peter is going to warn us about this in Chapter 5,

⁸ Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.

But, here Peter is talking about these demonic spirits as being in prison. They are not prowling, but they are in prison. There are two groups of demons the Bible describes: prowling demons and imprisoned demons. The prowling demons cannot do whatever they want to; they are given limits and boundaries by God and they can only do what God allows them to do. Some of these prowling demonic spirits step past those boundaries. When they did, God put them in this prison and this is what Peter is talking about, a place where they have no freedom whatsoever to work or to act. This must be a miserable place for demons. They fear this place something terrible. We know that from the story of Jesus healing the demoniac in the region of Garasene, in Luke 8,

³⁰ Jesus then asked him, "*What is your name?*" And he said, "Legion," for many demons had entered him. ³¹ And they begged him not to command them to depart into the abyss. ³² Now a large herd of pigs was feeding there on the hillside, and they begged him to let them enter these. So he gave them permission.

They did not want to go into that prison because they knew some of their demon brethren were already there. They knew about the place and how horrible it was. They wanted to be sent anywhere but there. What did these demons do, who were in prison? Verse 20, gives us some hints,

²⁰ ...because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared...

Peter does not tell us specific actions, but gives us a time frame: he did something during Noah's day and that something was an attempt to step past the boundaries which God had laid out for them in their fallen condition. My junior high son would say, "They got 'hosed' for it!"

In 2 Peter 2, he references this same event,

⁴ For 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.

The Lord knows how to deal with disobedient rebels. Let us not think we can escape if the angels cannot escape. The angels were incredible powerful strong beings and they could not escape God's judgment when they rebelled, so let us not think we can either. We, in our prideful life, believe we can get away with sin and rebellion to God and believe we will be all right.

Peter comments He went and “proclaimed” to these spirits. Proclaim is not the same term the New Testament uses when it describes the preaching of the Gospel. This is not an announcement of Jesus, to these demons, of salvation and hope for them. What is Jesus' message? This sermon was a message of His victory over sin, over the demonic realm, over Hell, over death, and over all that stood against Him. Why would Jesus do that? Is this a divine taunt to the demons? Is this like going to a basketball game and when one team is obviously going to lose, the home crowd, in a juvenile way, will say, “Na, na, na, na, na, na, hey, hey, hey, good-bye.” It may be, but not as such a juvenile fashion.

Let us imagine for a moment a Chicago gang takes over your neighborhood and they are having hard and horrible days. They terrorize your neighbors and your family. They pillage homes. They assault people. They murder family members. A few of them are arrested and finally something happens; they are found guilty and the judge, at the sentencing, makes this awesome statement of condemnation and of judgment and puts them in their place. He communicates they did not win. They thought they were winning in this neighborhood. They will spend the rest of their lives behind bars with no chance of parole. What does the judge's sermon do to you? He is not offering to them, “If you are nice from now on, you will be released.” It is not a message of salvation to these folks.

Why does he give it? First, the message strips the guilty of any sense of nobility regarding their sin. They thought they were the tough guys, the right guys, and on top of the world. Secondly, the message communicates justice and righteousness to the unjust and unrighteous people. They can no longer hide from the truth, but they are confronted with it. Third, the message gives great comfort to the family members who have been oppressed. Fourth, the message gives confidence that those who have not been arrested and not been sentenced, but who are still carrying out their rebellion and their sin, these will not win either. There is a day of reckoning coming. This boosts the courage of righteous people in the neighborhood.

This is why Jesus did this and why Peter is communicating, “Listen, when it seems as though they are winning, remember Jesus' sermon to the ones who were in prison.” Jesus' announcement of His victory is also an announcement of our victory as we are in Him. At the cross the demons thought they were victorious and they thought they were going to rule as gods. Jesus goes to the prison in which they were being held and my sanctified imagination has them breaking out in a party at the death of Christ, but He suddenly appears in the midst of the party and says, “You loose! I win!”

The third demonstration is: Jesus' secures those who trust in him,

²⁰ ...because 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 fallen, imprisoned angels connect Peter's thoughts to Noah's ark and what a picture of salvation this is. Jesus does for us what Noah's ark did for him. Just as Noah and his family were kept safe through the flood, by placing themselves inside the ark, so are we kept safe in the Day of Judgment by placing ourselves in Christ.

In 2 Peter 2:5, Noah is called a “preacher of righteousness”. What does he preach? He preaches God's judgment is coming. He is preaching salvation, “Get into the ark!” He preaches for decades and decades, but how many converts does he have at the end of all of that time of preaching and building the ark? He has zero, none, nada. He has his wife, his three sons, and their wives. That is it! He keeps telling them the rain is going to come and God is going to come and judge the earth and the people mocked, ridiculed, and scorned him. Everyone of them had an opportunity to be saved, but this family alone trusted in God when He said the judgment is coming. This family alone believed they needed to be inside the ark. This family alone believed God had provided a way of escape. Everyone else scoffed. Then Noah and his family were told to get into the ark, God shut the door, and the rain began to fall.

I can imagine there were some who were around Noah, that when the rain began to fall upon their head thought for themselves, “What is this?” Then fear welled up in them and they said, “Noah told me this was going to happen,” as it began to pour and pour. Perhaps they ran to the ark and began to pound on the outside, but it was too late.

Noah had the judgment of God coming down in the form of water and the judgment of God coming up in the form of water. In the midst of that judgment he was safe. That is the message. It is not that God kept Noah from being around judgment altogether, but it was in the midst of judgment, surrounded by the judgment of God, he was kept secure.

That is the triumph of Jesus and that is what Jesus does for us.

Noah teaches us we are never at a disadvantage when we are the ridiculed minority. He teaches us there is a day when the day of grace ends, never to return and we must soften our hearts before God and receive His kind and gentle warmth, His salvation, and get into the ark and run to Christ.

Then we have this verse to consider,

²¹ Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you...

Some people believe this passage teaches people are saved by way of baptism of water. If we are baptized in the church or a lake by a religious leader, we will be saved and it is essential to our salvation. Notice carefully Peter understands that might be the way the reader is taking this and he wants to move them away from that. He takes great care to move them away from that understanding. That is not what he is talking about at all. He says, on the heels of this, because if that is where he stops that may be a legitimate interpretation we may have, he says, "not as a removal of dirt from the body. I am not talking about physical baptism. I am not talking about the ritual at all being essential to the salvation I am describing. I am talking about baptism as an appeal to God for a good conscience. I am talking about what is behind that baptism. The water is in view so baptism is central to the Christian life and it is a part of the first act of obedience we give to God by way of the testimony of our salvation. I am talking about what stands behind the water ritual, that appeal to God, that faith in God, that trusting in God for one's soul. This is the appeal which leads to a good conscience. This is what brings about the regeneration, this transformed spirit. It is the appeal to God."

Peter could not make it clearer he is not talking about the ritual of water baptism, but about the appeal a person makes to God, because when we appeal to God for a good conscience and a change of soul, we are secure. Jesus secures you; that is the victory. You are a safe now and in that future day as Noah and his family were safe in the ark. The ark was never to capsize and it was never to sink. It was 100% safe in His arms.

Demonstration number four is Jesus' ascension to the Father's right hand,

²² ...who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

The message of the Gospel is: Jesus died upon the cross, He was buried, He rose from the grave, He appeared to many witnesses, and after forty days upon the earth He ascended into Heaven to dwell at the right hand with the glory of God the Father.

The right hand is the place of pre-eminence. It is the place of honor. It is the place of sovereign authority. This is where we find Jesus today. True, Jesus was mocked, ridiculed, assaulted and crucified, but guess what, that was the path which lead to His glory, which lead to His ascension into Heaven, which lead to His being seated at the right hand, which lead to Him being declared King of kings and Lord of lords, so at the end every knee will bow and every tongue will confess Jesus Christ is Lord.¹¹

The principle we learn from Jesus' ascension is: Glory is the end of the journey for all those who choose Jesus' path! Is that not remarkable? Does that encourage us to say, "I can endure because Jesus endured. Glory was the end of His path. That is the same path I am on." If we suffer with Him, we will be glorified with Him, too! Jesus found glory and triumph through the path of suffering. Suffering was the instrument of His exaltation and that is God's instrument for us, also.

Paul will say in 2 Timothy 2,

¹⁰ Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. ¹¹ The saying is trustworthy, for:
If we have died with him, we will also live with him; ¹² if we endure, we will also reign with him.

¹¹ Philippians 2:10, 11

When you suffer for Jesus' sake, if you are mocked and ridiculed, young people, if you are in school and you are taking a stand for Jesus' righteousness, the world around you hates you for that, think of the triumph of Jesus! You are on a path. It is not a path which leads to a total unpopularity and ruination of your life. Is that the path you are on? Jesus says, "No, that is not where that path leads. The path you are on leads to glory. I know it is hard now and I know you are tempted to give up and walk off of that path. I know there are easier paths for you right in front of you, but if you want to be led to eternal glory this is the path set out for you."

Just as Jesus gained triumph by way of suffering for us, so our suffering for Him becomes our very point of triumph. May God encourage us to be faithful.