

1 Peter-1 Peter 3:18—The Purpose of Easter
College Baptist Church
April 4, 2021—Easter Sunday

I invite you to turn with me to 1 Peter 3:18. 1 Peter can be found toward the end of the New Testament, just after the book of James. If you didn't bring a Bible, there are Bibles in the pew racks; I believe you will find 1 Peter 3:18 on p. 1016. Today's sermon text is also printed in the bulletin along with space for taking notes.

For those of you who are visiting with us today, we have been studying the book of 1 Peter this winter and spring. And we actually left off in chapter 2, verse 17 last week. And the plan is to pick up with chapter 2, verse 18 next week. But for this special Easter Sunday sermon, I have chosen to fast-forward to chapter 3, verse 18—as we focus on the death and resurrection of Jesus today. Please listen and follow along to 1 Peter 3:18.

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.

Introduction

One of the greatest (if not the greatest) engineering feats of our Great Lake State is the Mighty Mac—the Mackinac Bridge. Since 1957, this 5-mile suspension bridge has connected the Lower and Upper Peninsulas of Michigan. And by building a bridge from Mackinaw City to St. Ignace, the commercial and recreational relationship between our two peninsulas was firmly established. Yoopers and Trolls—as they call those of us who live south of (that is, “under”) the bridge—were permanently brought together by the Mighty Mac.

But what many of us may not know or have forgotten is that this bridge was built *by suffering*. And I'm not talking about the blood, sweat, and tears expended over three-plus years of construction. I am talking about the suffering of death. Five lives were lost during the construction of the Mighty Mac: Frank Pepper; James LeSarge; Albert Abbott; Jack Baker; and Robert Koppen. One died in a diving accident; one fell in a caisson while welding; one fell a couple of feet into the water and drowned; and two fell from a temporary catwalk near the top of north tower. These were men with loved ones. Men who took a risk by taking a dangerous job; but men who probably didn't expect to suffer death. Five lives lost—one for every mile of roadway. A bridge built by suffering.

1 Peter 3:18 paints a picture of another bridge built. It's not a physical bridge. It is a relational bridge—a bridge designed and constructed to bring sinful people like us into right relationship with our holy God. And it, too, is a bridge built by suffering.

Jesus—The Suffering King

Look with me again at the first phrase of verse 18. “*For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous.*” Now in order to understand the power of this phrase, we have to make sure we understand the term, Christ.

The word Christ—a word derived from Greek—is essentially synonymous with Messiah—a word derived from Hebrew. And both words mean Anointed One or Chosen One. Now, in the ancient world, kings were *chosen* by being *anointed* with oil. Remember the young shepherd boy named David, who killed Goliath the giant Philistine? He was *anointed* with oil by the prophet Samuel to signify that he had been *chosen* as the next king of Israel. Well, God made a promise to King David that one day he would send a Forever King to rescue and rule his people. And the people of Israel waited for hundreds of years for that King...but no one seemed to fit the bill.

That is, until Jesus arrived on the scene and began performing miracles—like healing the sick and calming storms—and teaching with authority that surpassed that of the religious leaders. And on one fateful day, Peter, the writer of the letter which we are studying today made this bold confession about Jesus as recorded in Matthew 16:16, “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!*” And Jesus affirmed Peter’s answer. Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, God’s only chosen King. But here is where things get interesting.

Jesus went on to say that as the Christ, “*he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and the chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.*” Peter couldn’t believe his ears. The Christ, the Messiah, the King must suffer and be killed!?! This couldn’t be. But it was true, whether Peter liked it or not.

Fast-forward thirty years and the same bold man, Peter, writes the words before you today. “*For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous.*” Peter—the first disciple to publicly confess Jesus as the Christ, reluctantly, but eventually came to understand that Jesus was the Christ who would suffer. Jesus is the Suffering King.

And for what did the King suffer? Peter tells us that “*he suffered once for sin, the righteous for the unrighteous.*” The suffering that Jesus endured as a King was not simply the suffering common to humanity—relational hardships, physical sickness, natural disasters, etc.... No, the suffering endured by Jesus the King was suffering for sins. But Peter makes two things abundantly clear about this suffering for sins.

First of all, he suffered *once* for sins. This one-time suffering is certainly a reference to his once-for-all death on the cross of Calvary. His sacrifice was complete, his work was accomplished. As we heard him say on Good Friday, “*It is finished.*” On that Good Friday all the animal sacrifices of the Old Covenant came to an end. Jesus had paid for sins, once and for all. Which means that it is not necessary to *re-present* his sacrifice over and over again, but rather to *remember* his sacrifice each time we come to the Lord’s Table, as we will later this morning.

Second of all, he suffered as “*the righteous for the unrighteous.*” Or to put it more clearly—he the righteous one suffered on behalf of the unrighteous many—us! Jesus the Suffering King suffered on behalf of his people—taking the just punishment that we deserved. He suffered not for his own sins—he had none. He suffered for *our* sins *once*.

It reminds me of a story I recently read in this little booklet called *“The Real Easter.”* If you would like a copy, there are some available on the table in the Narthex. The story is told about a Native American tribe whose chickens were being stolen. The chief of the tribe announced that when the chicken thief was caught, he would be publicly whipped for his wrong doing.

So, you can imagine the horror of the chief when the thief was caught and it was his own son! Since the chief was a just ruler—justice would be served. *“But just as the son was about to be whipped, the chief got off his chair, ran to him and wrapped himself around his back. The whip fell on the chief instead of the son. The chief took the punishment instead of his son.”* Friends, just as the chief suffered for his son, King Jesus suffered for sinners like us. For what purpose? The next phrase of 1 Peter 3:18 answers the question.

Jesus—The Bridge to God

Jesus suffered *“that he might bring us to God.”* The relational gap between sinners and God is vast...like Grand Canyon vast. If you’ve ever been to the Grand Canyon you can understand why there is no bridge from the north to south rim. The distance is too wide and deep. It can’t be spanned. In the same way, we can’t build a bridge to God—the gap is too great. God is perfect and we are not. God is righteous and we are not. God is holy and we are sinners. And this relational gap—created by our own wrongdoing—can’t be bridged humanly-speaking.

You probably know this from personal experience. You’ve tried to bridge the gap with good deeds...but you’re never sure if you’ve been good enough. You’ve tried to bridge the gap by religious ritual...but you end up tired from running on the treadmill of repetition. Or maybe you’ve tried to convince yourself that the gap really isn’t that great...in fact, maybe it’s not there at all!? But if that’s the case, why do you feel so empty and guilty? The gap is there...there is no denying it...and you can’t bridge it.

But thank God, Jesus bridged the gap. He suffered *“that he might bring us to God.”* Jesus—the Suffering King is the Bridge to God. By his suffering, he brings forgiven sinners back into right relationship with the God, who made them. We, who were once God’s enemies, are ushered into his presence and seated at his table as his children—not because of anything we have done, but because Jesus suffered once for our sins.

Jesus—The Living King

And Peter’s description of Jesus—the Bridge to God—does not end there. Listen to the final phrase of 1 Peter 3:18—*“being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit.”* We have already focused on the fact that Jesus *“was put to the death in the flesh.”* His death on the cross of Calvary was the height of his suffering. It is a reminder of his *physical* suffering for our sins once and for all.

But there is actually another legitimate way to translate this phrase. You could read it *“being put to death by the flesh.”* And I am inclined to think that this is the more accurate reading. Because the word *flesh* is a way to refer not only to our flesh and bones, but generally to all humanity. For instance, 1 Peter 1:24 says *“all flesh is like grass.”*

In that verse, Peter is reminding us of the mortality of all humanity, all flesh—all men and women die, just like the grasses in the field. So, if Jesus was “*being put to death by the flesh*”—it is a reference to his human executioners—which includes not only the Roman soldiers and the crowds crying “crucify him!” but also all of us, who contributed to his death sentence by our sins. Jesus was being put to death *by* the flesh of humankind as a whole. We are all to blame for his death.

But as we know on this resurrection morning, death did not have the last word for Jesus. Peter goes on to say that Jesus was “*made alive in the spirit.*” Or as I would suggest, “*made alive by the Spirit*—with a capital S.” On the one hand, Jesus was sadly put to death *by* the flesh of humankind. But on the other hand, Jesus was gloriously made alive *by* the power of the Holy Spirit. God the Holy Spirit is the powerful life-giver. The Spirit hovered over the waters in Genesis 1 as the world powerfully came to life. The Spirit descended on Jesus at his baptism and gave powerful life to his ministry. And the Spirit gave powerful life to Jesus’ dead body in the tomb. So, Jesus is not only the Suffering King. He is also the Living King! He lives today and forever!

In fact, it is his resurrection that gives us confidence that our sins have been forgiven and the bridge to God has been secured. The resurrection is the proof that Jesus truly conquered sin because he conquered the penalty of sin, which is death. And this resurrection has a profound impact on all those who believe. The Apostle Paul puts it this way in Romans 6:9-11, ⁹ *We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.* ¹⁰ *For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God.* ¹¹ *So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.*

In other words, all those who have put their faith in Jesus—the bridge to God—are dead to sin and alive to God. No longer do they face eternal death in hell, but eternal life with God. Thank God for Jesus the Suffering and Living King, who is the only bridge to God.

Application

With all of this in mind, I want to leave you with two challenges this morning.

First, I challenge you to **trust**. When you drive a car across the Mackinac Bridge you are exhibiting a significant amount of trust. You are trusting a bridge that was built in 1957 to keep you from falling some 200 feet to your death in the Straits of Mackinac. What are you trusting to bring you to God? Your good deeds? Your religious rituals? Your naïve notion that you don’t need a bridge to God? Friend, you need a bridge—a trustworthy bridge whose name is Jesus. He is the King who suffered for your sin. He is the King, who has conquered death and lives forever so that you might live eternally. He is worthy of your trust. Will you turn from sin and trust him today and always?!

Second, I challenge you to **tell**. Many Michiganders love to tell about the Mighty Mac—about its stats and strength. In fact, some are willing to spend a few extra bucks for a Mackinac Bridge license plate. How much more should we be eager to tell the Good News of Jesus the Suffering and Living King to those who have not yet trusted him?

Parents and grandparents, you can tell your kids and grandkids that Jesus is the only King who saves. All of us have relatives who need to be told about Jesus—the Suffering and Living King. Maybe you have a classmate or a co-worker or a neighbor who you need to tell that Jesus is the only bridge to God—and that he is worthy of their trust.

Who will you tell today or this week? Identify someone; start praying for him or her; and make a commitment to tell.

The purpose of Easter is trusting Jesus to bring us to God and then telling others to join us in trusting him too.

Benediction

I send you in the same way I greeted you this morning.

He is Risen!

He is Risen Indeed!

Now go in Jesus Christ Alone—the Suffering and Living King—our only bridge to God.