

1 Peter-Suffering for Good but not Forever—1 Peter 3:8-22
College Baptist Church
April 18, 2021

I invite you to turn with me to 1 Peter 3:8. 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 3:8 on p. 1015. Today's sermon text is also printed in the bulletin along with space for taking notes.

You've probably heard the expression, "stay out of the weeds," right? It's a figure of speech which is meant to help you stay focused and keep moving forward on the main path instead of getting distracted by and tangled up in some weeds along the way. Well, the passage before us today has some very interesting (and theologically important!) weeds. But these weeds are not the main point of the passage or the book of 1 Peter. So, I want to warn you in advance that we will take a look at the weeds, and give some effort to understanding the weeds, BUT we will do our best to stay out of the weeds so that we remain focused on the path that Peter has marked out before us—namely *a path to understand the role of suffering in the life of the Christian*.

Last week we focused—in part—on the suffering of Christian slaves in the first century. And Peter's encouragement to those slaves was to *submit* to unjust suffering like Jesus—the Suffering Servant, who suffered so that we might be saved. Well, as it turns out, unjust suffering was not limited to slaves in the ancient world. Christians—like those to whom Peter wrote in Northern Asia Minor—were a persecuted minority in the Roman Empire. So, Peter returns to the theme of suffering here in chapter 3, verse 8. And he wants Christians—back then and now—to understand that *Christians may suffer for good, but they will not suffer forever*. Let's listen to Peter's words—inspired by the Holy Spirit—starting in chapter 3, verse 8. And watch out for the weeds in verses 19-21!

⁸ Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. ⁹ Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing. ¹⁰ For "Whoever desires to love life

and see good days,
let him keep his tongue from evil
and his lips from speaking deceit;
¹¹ let him turn away from evil and do good;
let him seek peace and pursue it.
¹² For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,
and his ears are open to their prayer.
But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil."

¹³ Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? ¹⁴ But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, ¹⁵ but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it

with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶ having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. 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.

Blessing, Not Suffering

It is increasingly obvious that we live in a violent and vitriolic culture. Another mass shooting this week—8 lives lost a bit closer to home this time, in Indianapolis. And shots were fired right down the road on Friday in Ann Arbor at the Briarwood Mall—a place familiar to many of you. Thankfully the injuries were not fatal, but violence in such close proximity certainly gets our attention in an alarming sort of way, doesn't it?

And if it's not physical violence, its verbal vitriol. From twitter wars to Facebook censorship, social media is a sphere of suffering. In our cancel culture, you never know who might turn on whom next. No one seems safe from the suffering inflicted by friend or foe. And as Christians, we are vulnerable to this violence and vitriol—not just on the receiving end. Sadly, Christians are increasingly guilty of inflicting suffering on one another as evidenced by the fracturing of American evangelicalism on the whole AND as experienced in hostility between Christian family members and local church members.

But Peter reminds all of his readers—both then and now—that we are not to take our cues from the culture around us. There is enough suffering happening around us and being inflicted upon us. So, we must not inflict suffering on one another. Instead, he calls us to a life of blessing. Do you see that in verse 9?

⁹ Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing.

It seems that our Christian ancestors were letting the suffering around them get the best of them. And that they were tempted to turn on one another, like the world is so hasty to do. But the church is not to be a place of pay-backs and put-downs. The church is to be a safe-haven of blessing, not suffering.

And what does that “blessing” look like? Well, he gives us a very clear description in the instructions in verse 8. And notice these instructions are for “all of you”—or as they might say in the South “*all y'all*” or in Pennsylvania “*you'uns*” or as we say here in the Midwest “*you guys*”—no disrespect to the ladies. Whether you are a slave, a wife, a husband...or none of the above, you are called to be a blessing, not inflict suffering.

“All of you” are called to bless one another by having...

- Unity of mind—that is, to be “harmonious” in your thinking
- Sympathy—that is, *feeling with* someone and for someone
- Brotherly love—that is, family-love, a love that goes deeper than superficial likes
- A tender heart—that is, compassion and mercy that springs from deep within
- A humble mind—a willingness to lower yourself, in order to elevate another

In an article entitled “The Splintering of the Evangelical Soul,” the President and CEO of *Christianity Today*, Timothy Dalrymple wrote last Friday, “...*the church should be offering a community of common love, a sanctuary from the fragmentation and polarization, from the loneliness and isolation of the present moment. The church should model what it means to care for one another in spite of our differences...and affirm the incomparably deeper rootedness of our identity in Christ.*” Sounds like some advice right out of Peter’s playbook, to be agents of blessing, not suffering.

Thank God, we have been largely spared from self-destructive splintering and suffering here at College Baptist. And I pray that *if* we fight in the days ahead, we will not fight one another. But rather, that we will fight for *unity, sympathy, love, compassion, and humility*...so that we might be a blessing to one another.

Suffering for Good

Because according to verse 9, it is this sort of *behavior of blessing* to which you were called—that is, called by God. And to those who choose to bless there comes a blessing. Those who bless will reap a blessing—a blessing from God himself. Notice that Peter borrows again from Psalm 34 to make this point. As I have mentioned before, Psalm 34 is quoted and alluded to over and over again in his short letter. Did you notice that our Call to Worship was from Psalm 34—specially a call to “*bless the LORD at all times?*”

Well, verses 10-12 are a quotation from Psalm 34:12-16. And they remind us that those who bless the LORD and others, will receive a blessing from the LORD himself. Listen.
*“Whoever desires to love life
and see good days,
let him keep his tongue from evil
and his lips from speaking deceit;
11 let him turn away from evil and do good;
let him seek peace and pursue it.
12 For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,
and his ears are open to their prayer.
But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”*

So, a life of righteous blessing in Psalm 34 is characterized by refraining from evil and deceitful speech and doing good while pursuing peace. It is the opposite of the violent and vitriolic world around us. And to those who choose to cultivate blessing, there is a promise of blessing from the LORD—his eyes are *on* the righteous and his ears are *open* to their prayers. That is to say that the LORD cares for them—like a judge who sees the evidence and hears the horrors of a victim of abuse.

In contrast, the face of the LORD is *against* those who do evil. That is to say, they who inflict suffering will face his judgment, NOT his blessing. It's the picture of judge delivering a guilty verdict and sentencing a criminal to the punishment deserved.

And if you continue reading in Psalm 34, the next two verses say this,
*When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears
and delivers them out of all their troubles.*

¹⁸ *The Lord is near to the brokenhearted
and saves the crushed in spirit.*

You see, Peter knows that his readers *have been* and *will be* troubled. He knows that they are brokenhearted and crushed by suffering—especially suffering for living righteous lives in a pagan world. But in the midst of the suffering he doesn't want them to doubt the blessing of God on their lives. Which is why he says in verse 14, “...*even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed.*”

Who does that sound like? Can you hear an echo of Jesus in Peter's words? Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount as recorded in Matthew 5:10-12, “*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.* ¹² *Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.*”

Don't misunderstand, the persecution itself is *not* a blessing. The blessing is a heavenly kingdom of eternal blessings that far outweigh the sufferings of this world. Nero might be able to harm them temporarily, but he can't harm them eternally. So, they ought not live in fear, troubled by wicked human rulers. Instead, they should continue to live their lives to honor the only Lord that matters—Jesus Christ himself.

This willingness to suffer for righteousness' sake was bound to raise eyebrows. People would certainly wonder, “what *on earth* would possess someone to endure suffering instead of playing dirty and “*repaying evil with evil?*” So, Peter says in verse 15 that they should “*always [be] prepared to make a defense to anyone who ask you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.*”

Now, many of you will be familiar with this verse as the foundation of Christian apologetics—that is, defending the truth of the Bible and providing answers for the legitimacy of the Christian faith. And that is certainly within the scope of the meaning of this verse. But in this context, Peter is primarily encouraging Christians to have a gentle, respectful response ready for those ask about their willingness to suffer for their good behavior in Christ. He wants them to be ready to explain the “*hope that is in [them].*”

There is that word again, *hope*—a key theme in 1 Peter. Remember back in chapter 1, when we talked about hope—hope of a future salvation, “*an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you?*” Peter says that hope—that is, the rock-solid confidence that God's heavenly blessing is in store for God's people—is the primary motivator for suffering for good in Jesus name.

Friends, we need to prepare ourselves to be reviled for our good behavior in Christ. We need to recognize that according to verse 17, it is God’s will for us to do good and that doing good *may* result in suffering. Our violent and vitriolic world is already showing increasing signs of hostility against Christians. For instance, God’s good design for sexuality and family and gender are under fire—and those who stand for those good things will experience ridicule and persecution in the days ahead. And on a more foundational level, the exclusivity of Jesus Christ as the only Lord who saves sinners is seen as intolerant and hateful in our secular society—so to proclaim that truth will bring hardship and suffering.

But Peter wants us to realize that while we may suffer for good temporarily, we will not suffer forever. Furthermore, those who inflict suffering on Christians will ultimately be put to shame. And this is all because Jesus Christ is the Suffering Savior and the Resurrected, Ruler, who has triumphed over his shameful enemies and secured blessing for his suffering people.

Suffering for Good, but not Forever

Let me say that again, because it is the main point of verses 18-22—and I don’t want you to miss it as we get into the weeds of verses 19-21 a little bit. Jesus Christ is the Suffering Savior and the Resurrected Ruler, who has triumphed over his shameful enemies and secured blessing for his suffering people.

If eternal blessing is the *motivator* for suffering for doing good. Then Jesus Christ is the *model* for suffering for doing good. Verse 18—which was our focus on Easter Sunday two weeks ago—makes it abundantly clear that the suffering of Jesus on the cross of Calvary was unjust suffering. Jesus the righteous one died for the unrighteous many—in order to bring us back into right relationship with God. Jesus bridged the gap. He was put to death by the flesh of sinful humans. But he did not remain in the grave; he was made alive by the Spirit. And the resurrection of Jesus is proof that he had conquered sin and its consequence, death.

But when you skip down to verse 22, you see that Jesus did not merely rise from the grave, he also rose to heaven where he rules. Listen again to verse 22, “[he] has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him. At this very moment, Jesus is ruling at the right hand of God—he is the Resurrected Ruler. He rules over angels, authorities, and powers—including Nero and all perpetrators of suffering. Everything has been subjected to him, that is, everything and everyone is under Jesus—including both his shameful enemies and his suffering people. With that said, let’s try our best to understand the weeds of vv.19-21.

Verses 19-20 say that the resurrected Jesus, who was made alive by the Spirit, went in the Spirit and “*proclaimed to the spirits in prison,²⁰ because they formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah*” Now this statement raises at least three questions, (1) who are the disobedient spirits in prison, (2) how exactly did Christ in the Spirit proclaim to them, and (3) what was proclaimed to them? Who, how, and what.

Now, among biblical scholars there is no consensus on the answers to these questions—but there are some different viewpoints. And I'll outline four views briefly.

View 1 suggests that...

- (1) the disobedient spirits in prison are the disobedient people in Noah's day—those described as wicked and violent and corrupt in Genesis 6. They are described as imprisoned because of their bold disobedience against God.
- (2) In this view, Noah is actually the proclaimer—empowered by the Spirit of Christ like the Old Testament prophets. In fact, Noah is called a "*herald of righteousness*" in 2 Peter 2:5—and to herald is to proclaim.
- (3) So, in this view, Noah proclaimed righteousness and they did not obey.

View 2 suggests that...

- (1) the disobedient spirits in prison are fallen angels. This view is held by those who believe the "*sons of God*" in Genesis 6 were angels who disobediently cohabited with the human females—the "*daughters of man*"—in Noah's day.
- (2) In this view, the resurrected Christ empowered by the Spirit, proclaimed to these fallen angels, which have been subjected to him, as we heard in verse 22.
- (3) And his proclamation would have been a proclamation of victory while they are being kept in the prison of Hades, until their final judgment.

View 3 suggests that...

- (1) the disobedient spirits in prison are people in hell.
- (2) In this view, Christ empowered by the Spirit, visits these spirits in hell
- (3) And he proclaims to them a "second chance" for salvation.

View 4 suggests that...

- (1) the disobedient spirits in prison are people from the days of Noah currently in hell
- (2) In this view, the resurrected Christ makes his proclamation not so much by the power of the Spirit, but in the realm of the Spirit—that is, from heaven.
- (3) And the proclamation of Christ is one of victory—"*announcing his victory over his past enemies at the flood who are being kept in the prison of Hades until final judgment.*" (Hafemann, notes from Savannah Sabbatical)

Of these views, I personally find views 1 & 4 the most convincing. View 3 should be totally rejected, because nowhere in Scripture are people in hell given a "second chance" at salvation. View 2 is improbable in my opinion because I don't think that the "*sons of God*" are fallen angels cohabiting with women during the days of Noah.

Views 1 and 4 have this in common—a proclamation of judgment on the disobedient. View 1 makes Noah the proclaimer empowered by the Spirit of Christ—proclaiming judgment *in advance* of the flood. View 4 makes Jesus himself the proclaimer, which seems to fit better grammatically. His proclamation is one of victory over the disobedient, who have already experienced the judgment of the flood, but are still facing the final judgment. In both views, the disobedient—which includes those who inflict suffering on God's people like Noah—will be judged by Jesus, the Resurrected Ruler.

In contrast, the experience of Noah and his family, is the model for how the Lord secures blessing for his suffering people. As you know, instead of being swallowed up by the flood waters with the disobedient people of his day, Noah and his seven family members were brought safely through the water in an ark. They were rescued through the waters of judgment—experiencing the blessing of salvation from God’s judgment because of their faith in his promise to save them.

In verse 21, Peter says that this act of salvation through the waters of judgment corresponds to baptism. But he makes clear that baptism is “*not [the] removal of dirt from the body.*” My fellow elder, Professor Don Westblade pointed out to me that “*dirt from the body*” could be translated more literally “*dirt from the flesh.*” And since *flesh* is a way to speak of sinful humanity or sinful nature or sinful desires of humans, Peter is explaining that the baptismal waters don’t wash off sin. So, Peter’s teaching stands in stark contrast to the erroneous teaching of the Roman Catholic tradition.

Instead, according to Peter, baptism “*saves*” not as an act in and of itself, but because it is an expression of “*an appeal to God for a good conscience.*” In other words, baptism is an expression of faith—not faith in water that will wash away your sin, but faith in God to whom you have appealed for good, clear conscience—that is a conscience clear of the guilt of sin. And notice in verse 22, that this appeal of faith in the waters of baptism is made on the basis of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It’s an appeal “*through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.*”

Just as Noah was saved from the deadly flood waters by faith, baptism of a believer is a picture of being saved from the judgment of death—as Romans 6:4 puts it, “*we were buried with him in baptism and raised to walk in newness of life.*” We should have drowned in the flood of our sin, but Jesus graciously saved us to live with him and for him forever. And this means that suffering is not the final word for people who have placed their faith in Jesus. We may suffer for doing good, but we will not suffer forever.

Jesus Christ is the Suffering Savior and Resurrected Ruler, who has triumphed over his shameful enemies and secured forever blessing for his suffering people.

Benediction—1 Peter 5:10-11

[May] the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, ...restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. ¹¹To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.