

Glory follows the cross!

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1 Peter 3:18-22
14 December 2014

INTRODUCTION

The entire epistle of Peter is a call to swim against the stream. We cannot live like the rest of the world, because we shall be holy, for God is holy. As we have seen in the beginning of the epistle, our holiness does not rest on our merits, but on the grace and the sovereignty of God who set us apart for Him. In response to this amazing gift of salvation, we want to live for the glory of God. To live out our holiness, we follow Jesus and imitate His faith and obedience. As Peter makes it very clear, the disciples of Christ will suffer unjustly. One of the main reasons for this epistle is to help Christians live through persecution in a God-honoring way. In the midst of their trials Christians can proclaim God's excellencies; He has called them out of darkness into His marvelous light. Despite difficulties, Christians can manifest God's love to one another. Moreover, God expects them to submit to those in authority over them, even if that would lead them to be treated unjustly. If we decide to please the Lord, rather than the world and ourselves, we will run into trouble. Most people will not understand our choices. Even our closest relatives and friends may try to convince us to choose the easy path.

Many pastors and missionaries choose to go into ministry without the approval of their unsaved family members. Unsaved people cannot understand why someone would leave a good position or a comfortable home to move to Africa or other parts of the world to preach the Gospel. Unsaved people cannot understand why you spend so much time at church, praying or studying the Word. They have the feeling that you're missing out on something when you don't go out with them to the clubs, bars, or other worldly places. They cannot understand how blessed we are when we come together as a church family to pray, sing, listen to the Word and enjoy fellowship. This blessing does not mean that we necessarily feel "good" or go through life without problems. It has to do with the spiritual blessings God bestows on us as His church.

The more we read this epistle, the more we understand that our calling to serve Christ is far greater than anything else is. In Chapter 2 verse 9a, Peter said, ***"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession..."*** The recipients of this epistle could find strength in these truths in times of persecution. However, these great blessings also compelled them to live for Christ and proclaim the Gospel despite persecution. Living for Christ in our families, at our workplace, and in society in general will inevitably bring some kind of suffering. In those difficult moments, we can remain calm and at peace; after all, our hope does not lie in our present circumstances, but in the grace and the promises of God. As we have seen last week, people will question our choices and may mock us, but we can defend our hope with gentleness and reverence. Our hope is not in this world. Our hope is not in men. Our hope is in Jesus Christ our Savior and our Lord who will someday return to take us to be with Him!

Peter had spent three years with Jesus. The Gospel accounts tell us that he did not want to believe that Jesus would have to suffer. Many Christians still believe that suffering should not be part of the life of a spiritual Christian. Listen to what Jesus said in Mark 8: 31-38, ***"And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. And He was stating the matter plainly. And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. But turning around and seeing His disciples, He rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind Me, Satan; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's'. And He summoned the crowd with His disciples, and said to them, 'If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul? For what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.'"***

Peter and Jesus were not teaching that Christians should seek suffering, but that suffering was part of Christian life. It pleases God when we suffer for doing good. Peter finished the previous section with verse 17, ***"For it is better, if God should will that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong."*** This brings us to our text of this morning, where Peter explained that Jesus indeed suffered for what was right. As we will see, His suffering was not the end of the story. We may have to suffer for Christ, but we know that glory will follow suffering just as victory has followed the cross. Our text this morning is not an easy one to understand, but it is a great

encouragement, because it once again forces us to look on the person of Christ. Peter presents Christ to us not only as the One who suffered, but also as the One who preaches to the lost and finally as the One who is exalted. For the Christians in Asia Minor of the first century, Jesus was the example to follow, but also the Lord who had saved them, and who would sustain them until the end. To be able to live rightly in times of distress and temptations, we must remember the cross, preach the Gospel and live a victorious life. The followers of Jesus will not only suffer, but they too will one day be with Him in His glory!

1. **Remember the cross**

Peter had just told his readers that it is better to suffer for what is right. Jesus, who was perfectly innocent, had to suffer. He even had to die! Many of these Christians had probably done nothing that deserved the harsh treatment they had to suffer from their persecutors. Peter reminded them again that Jesus had to undergo the same opposition. However, He was just and had never done anything wrong or sinned in any way. He did not have to die for His sins, but He had to die for ours. When we feel that we are treated unjustly, we can always remember how Jesus was treated. None of the injustice that people can inflict upon us can be compared with what Christ had to endure at the cross.

Very often, we suffer justly as the consequences of bad choices. If I get a fine for speeding, I may feel it is unjust because I had a good reason to drive fast that morning. Yet I deserve the fine. I know a number of people who suffer, because they tolerate sin in their lives. If I do what is wrong, I should not be surprised to suffer the consequences. This is why it is so important to teach our children what is right. It is important that they hear it from their parents, and see it in their homes. So much suffering could be avoided if we understood better what sin is and how damaging the results of sin are. Sin always causes suffering and ultimately death. Sin is never in harmony with God's will. When we sin, we declare that we know better than God does. When we sin, we do not believe that the Lord loves us and cares for us. When we sin, we prefer our will to His. When we sin, we believe the lie of the Devil, rather than the glorious Word of the Lord. When we follow that path, we will suffer for doing wrong. This suffering leads to sadness and to more suffering. The only way to break the cycle is to come to the cross and repent.

When Peter speaks about suffering in this epistle, he has in mind the sufferings Christians endure when they decide to serve the Lord in the midst of persecution for their faith. These Christians were suffering because they were Christians and acting as Christians. In our countries in the West, we do not yet know what it means to be persecuted for our profession of faith as Christians. True enough, our world teaches us that each individual may have his own religion as long as we do not claim there is only one truth. At CCC, we are already in a minority because we proclaim that Jesus is *the way, the truth and the life*. We also agree with the apostle Peter when speaking of Jesus, he said in Acts 4:12, ***“And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.”*** Furthermore, we believe in the inerrancy of the Scriptures. We trust that God has given us a clear message in the Bible that we can read and understand. We believe in a literal interpretation of the Bible. We believe, for example, that God created the world in six solar days. We trust that we can take God at His word. I could probably list many other beliefs that we hold and that are in total contradiction with the mainstream. The Christians back then had to suffer persecution for refusing to worship Cesar or other gods. Many suffered and even died for their faith. Their only consolation was the cross of Christ, where their Savior and ours suffered unjustly for them. Are we ready to stand firm and accept the suffering that comes with our faith? We have many opportunities even now to take a stand for the Lord in our workplace, at school or in our families. When we do that, we may have to suffer unjustly, but at least we will suffer for what is right. Let us serve Him and trust Him without fear! Let us prepare ourselves in this way for times that may be more difficult!

Not only has Christ suffered unjustly, but also His sacrifice was unique and perfect. He died for sins once for all. Christians can face suffering and even death, because they know that their sins have been forgiven once for all. They also know that Christ's unique sacrifice is even valid for their persecutors if they repent. They do not have to add any other sacrifice to be redeemed. If they have to suffer for their faith, it is not to obtain God's love or forgiveness, but it is out of faithfulness for their Redeemer and for the glory of God. We can live and die without fearing the wrath of God. We can die without fear of judgment. We can suffer for Christ, because we know that this suffering will not last forever. Suffering will stop, and will be followed by glory. We only have one life! Jesus made the best of His life. Let us keep our eyes on Him and do the best with ours!

To remember the cross is also to remember that Jesus has brought us to God. He has reconciled us with our Creator. Ephesians says that we are seated with Christ in the heavenly places. When we have to face persecution, we can always remember that through the cross of Christ, we have been brought to God and belong to Him forever. This is worth more than anything the world can offer. Through Jesus, we have a direct access to God the Father. When we

are facing trials and persecution, we can remember that at the cross, Jesus made it possible for us to be in fellowship with God. Remember the story of Stephen. When the Jews stoned him, he saw Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father to welcome him in heaven. Whatever the Lord allows in our lives, He will always be very close to us and give us the strength we need.

When we remember the cross, we also realize that the sufferings of Jesus were extremely violent. He had to bear the sins of the world. He had to suffer the wrath of God. He also had to suffer in his body. We cannot describe all He had to go through for us. He was put to death in the flesh. However, His death was not the end of His story. The text also says that He was made alive in his spirit. God received Him in the spiritual sphere of Heaven. And three days later, He rose from the dead in His incorruptible body. Later in this epistle Peter explained that Christians, who die in their flesh, live in the spirit according to the will of God. In other words, when we suffer and die for Christ, our death is not the end of our story. We have received eternal life. After our death we enter into the presence of God. When Christ returns to take His Church, we will receive our incorruptible bodies too.

To remember the cross is to realize that Jesus had to suffer, but also to remember that victory followed the cross. If we have to suffer for our faith, we will not only follow Christ in His suffering but also in His victory! Peter wanted his readers to remember and ponder what Jesus had done on the cross, so that they would be strengthened in their own trials. He then reassured them that they could keep preaching the Gospel, despite the opposition and the persecution.

2. Preach the Gospel

Verses 19 and 20 have been interpreted in several ways. Some claim that Jesus visited hell to preach the Gospel to those who had not repented in Noah's days. This view is in total contradiction with other passages in the Bible. We know that we have to make a choice during our earthly lifetime. There is no second chance after death. Hebrews 9:27 says, **"...it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment..."**

Others believe that "spirits in prison" refer to fallen angels. If indeed they are fallen angels, Peter may have meant that after Jesus Christ arose He announced to them that their doom was now sure.

A more probable explanation is that these "spirits" were the unbelievers in the time of Noah. They are now in prison waiting for their resurrection and the judgment of God. It would mean that the spirit of Jesus was in Noah, when he preached to his contemporaries. This view is in harmony with what Peter said earlier in this epistle (1:11), when he said that the spirit of Christ was in the prophets of old.

In the context of the readers of Peter, that meant that they could keep announcing the message of God, as Noah did in his time, because God would protect them. They did not have to fear judgment. God was very patient in the times of Noah. He sent the flood after 120 years and only when the ark was completed. People in Noah's times did not accept his message. They mocked him and his family. Yet God accomplished His Word. Noah's detractors could not stop God's plan.

Jesus said that the end times would be similar to the generation of Noah. We are Christ's ambassadors just as Noah was. 2 Cor 5:20 says, **"Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."** Jesus sends us to preach the Good News and make disciples. Our opponents often intimidate us. The new societal laws adopted by our countries tempt us to fear the worst. We see so many obstacles to the proclamation of the Gospel. As time passes it seems to be getting clear that proclaiming the Gospel as it is will lead to persecution. Yet the example of Noah should convince us to continue to preach, because we do not do it by our own strength. The One who has been given all authority in heaven and on earth backs us up. He will protect our work, as he protected the construction of the ark. Paul said to the Philippians in chapter 1 verse 6, **"For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus."** Persecution will not hinder the plan of God. Persecution should not hinder us from preaching the Gospel. The work we are called to do is a spiritual work. God's Spirit is greater than any obstacle that we may encounter.

The Christians in Asia Minor were probably not very numerous. They had to face authorities who were against them and family members who abandoned them. They may have wondered why only so few people did believe in the message of the Gospel. We, too, are often the only Christian in our classroom, in our office, or even in our family. The story of Noah reminds us that the entire population of his world was against him! Only eight people survived the flood! God remained faithful to these eight people. We should not be surprised if the vast majority does not listen to us. It is not surprising, because the heart of men today is as wicked as the heart of the men in Noah's time. They do not want to hear about judgment. They do not want to hear that they need a Savior. Those who reject the Gospel will be

condemned with the unbelievers of Noah's day. Whereas we, who have trusted Christ, we will be saved and spend eternity with God!

To remember the cross of Christ will strengthen us in times of persecution. To preach the Gospel is something that Christians do at all times, even in persecution and trials. Lastly, Christians can live victorious lives in all circumstances.

3. Live a victorious life

In verse 21, Peter used the flood as a type of baptism. Noah and his family were saved through the water. Some have tried to use this passage to say that water baptism saves. They use it to justify infant baptism. The teaching of the Bible is very clear: we are saved by grace through faith. The sacrifice of Christ is perfect and we cannot add anything to His work. Water baptism does not save us from sin. It does not save us by cleansing us from defilement, either physically or spiritually. Instead it is the vivid symbol of the changed life of one who has a conscience at peace with God through faith in Christ. Baptism represents our death with Christ and our new life in Him.

For many people baptism is a difficult step to take. When the Jews, who believed on the day of Pentecost, were baptized in the name of Jesus, they had to suffer persecution from their community. Later many Christians had to suffer for taking a public stand for Christ. Baptism is not something we do in secret. When we are baptized, we publicly declare that we believe in Christ and that we want to live for Him.

Dr. Thomas Constable states the following about this passage, "Peter's point in his comments about baptism was this. In water baptism his readers had made a public profession of faith in Christ in their community. This had led to persecution. However by that act of baptism they had also testified to their ultimate victory over their persecutors. Because they had taken a stand for Jesus Christ they could be sure that He would stand with them (cf. 2 Tim. 2:12)."

If baptism leads to persecution and isolation from our families and friends, we understand why some delay. Yet Peter clearly says that we can live a life of victory, because Christ is risen. He is at the right hand of God and all angels, powers and authorities have been subjected to Him. Therefore we can take a stand for Him and be victorious over our fears and over our persecutors. If all powers have been subjected to my savior, who can defeat me? If I am on the Lord's side, who is against me?

Peter reminded his readers that they were indeed on the Victor's side. If you know Christ, He is on your side! If you know Christ and have not yet been baptized, do not delay! He will strengthen you and stand by your side as you give a public testimony. Once you see how God grants you this victory, you will be ready for further battles with Him and for Him! The Christians in the first century had taken a risk when they proclaimed publicly that they were Christians. They lived in a world that rejected them, yet they were victorious. What about us? What keeps us from taking a public stand for Christ? We can live victorious lives, because our Savior is much greater than our most terrifying enemies.

If you have been baptized some years ago, and have become lukewarm in your faith, remember the day you stood in front of people declaring publicly that Christ was your Lord. Remember your first love and your desire to be a witness whatever the cost. Baptism is only one step of obedience that is followed by many other battles and victories. The battle goes on but the final victory is sure! Jesus has proven it to us when He arose from the dead and ascended to Heaven. He sent us His Holy Spirit and gave us all the equipment to live a victorious life in all circumstances. Our great enemy, the Devil was defeated at the cross! We can live victorious lives in Christ!

CONCLUSION

The first century Christians in Asia Minor probably had many questions when they faced persecution. Where will I find the strength to remain faithful? Why does God allow all that suffering? How can I honor God in such a terrible situation? Will this suffering ever take an end? How will I face tomorrow?

Our text this morning does not necessarily answer all our questions, but it gives clear indications on how to live our Christian life in a pagan world. It also gives us much hope.

We can at all times remember the cross and rejoice in the perfect sacrifice of Christ. We can always preach the Gospel, knowing that Jesus will be with us. We can live victorious lives because Christ is Lord of Lords. Our ministry will not be without suffering, but we shall never forget that victory follows the cross and that glory follows our suffering.