

Christ’s Victory through Suffering (1Peter 3:18-22)

I. OVERVIEW (3:18-20)

Few passages of the New Testament are as difficult to interpret as 1 Peter 3:18-20 and, indeed, many consider this passage the most obscure in the entire New Testament.

From the late second century until today this passage has received widely diverging interpretations, “each of which has no clearly overwhelming claim to certainty.”

There are three main interpretations each with its own strengths and weaknesses.

In the early third century, Saint Clement of Alexandria took these verses to mean that Christ, during the silence of Holy Saturday, descended to the dead to make a final offer of salvation to the deceased sinners of Noah’s day.

In the fifth century, St. Augustine proposed a different interpretation: Christ, by exercise of his pre-existent divinity, preached to the ancient world through the person of Noah, urging the wicked to repent before the flood waters of judgment came to sweep them away.

Much later, near the turn of the 17th century, Saint Robert Bellarmine reconnected the passage with Holy Saturday, only he proposed that Christ descended to the dead to announce his salvation to those sinners who privately repented just before the onset of the flood.

Modern times have seen the rise of yet another interpretation. The passage concerns, not the descent of Christ to the realm of the dead, but his Ascension into Glory. On his way up, it is said that

he presented himself as Victor and Conquer to a company of demons imprisoned in the lower heavens.

“In view of this diversity of opinion, even among great theologians of the Church, the definitive interpretation of the passage seems out of the question” (see ICSB page 36 *Christ and “the Spirits in Prison”* for a more detailed discussion).

Read: 1 Peter 3:18-20

[18] For Christ also died for sins once for all, 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 preached to the spirits in prison,

[20] who formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved 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 clear 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 subject to him.

A. Christ Died for Sins Once for All (3:18)

Peter's opening is clear and straightforward. He sums up Christ’s redemptive work on our behalf: ***Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the sake of the unrighteous, that he might lead you to God.***

Peter says that Jesus died for sins ***“once for all,”*** showing that Jesus’ suffering provides the single, superabundantly sufficient sacrifice for sin that will never need repeating.

In other words, Jesus, our High Priest, offered himself to God as a sacrifice. By this one sacrifice he made provision for all the needs

of the whole human race in every area of our lives, for time and for eternity.

The grace of the Cross is applied to man, in a special way, by means of the sacraments, particularly by taking part in the Mass, the unbloody renewal of the sacrifice of Calvary.

B. Why Did Christ Die For Us?

He suffered **“that he might bring us to God.”** The goal of Christ’s atoning suffering is to bring **us** into the presence of God: “for through [Christ] we have access in one Spirit to the Father (Eph 2:18).

C. Put to Death in the Flesh (3:18)

It is clear that Peter refers to the Crucifixion when he says that Jesus was **“put to death in the flesh.”** What is more difficult to interpret is the statement that he was **“made alive in the spirit;** At first sight, this would seem to refer to the Resurrection, for this is how the verb “make alive” is often used in the New Testament.

However, at this point we need to pause and examine in turn the three primary interpretations of verses 18b-20 and briefly evaluate each one.

A. Christ Descended to Hades in the Interval between His Death and Resurrection

The most ancient interpretation beginning with Clement of Alexandria (c. 200) understands these verses as describing Christ’s descent into Hades (i.e. Sheol, the realm of the dead, visualized as a chamber of souls hidden deep in the underworld) where **“he went and preached to the spirits in prison. . .”**

- But he descended there as Savior, proclaiming the Good News to the spirits imprisoned there (CCC 632).

CCC 633: Scripture calls the abode of the dead, to which the dead Christ went down, “hell” – *Sheol* in Hebrew or *Hades* in Greek – because those who are there are deprived of the vision of God.

Such is the case for all the dead, whether evil or righteous, while they await the Redeemer. [This] does not mean that their lot is identical, as Jesus shows through the parable of the poor man Lazarus who was received into “Abraham’s bosom.”

Having been ***put to death in the flesh*** through his crucifixion, Christ ***was brought to life in the spirit*** (literally, “made alive in the spirit.”)

According to this first interpretation Peter is saying that Christ went in his soul (his “spirit”), that is, without his body, to the place of the dead ***and preached to the spirits in prison.***

Who are these “spirits”?

They are those ***who had once been disobedient while God patiently waited in the days of Noah during the building of the ark*** (NAB).

Historically, the spirits in this verse have been identified with the souls of the wicked that perished in the flood. Only Noah and his family, ***eight in all, were saved through water.***

In other words, the spirits are the souls of disobedient humans, imprisoned in Hades (or Sheol), where Christ found them and preached to them after his own death.

At this point, the interpretations diverge.

Some maintain that all the dead in Hades were given an opportunity to hear Christ and repent, others that Christ simply

proclaimed his victory to these disobedient spirits, but that they did not have a chance to repent.

This interpretation of 1 Peter 3:18-20 was especially favored by the Church Fathers from Alexandria but it faces some serious problems.

Difficulties in Interpretation:

For one, it is difficult to see why Jesus should single out these particular sinners as his audience for preaching in Hades. Surely they could not experience a saving conversion after death.

- The Catholic doctrinal tradition, at least, has not been open to this possibility.

Furthermore, none of the ancient texts or traditions known to us indicates that any of Noah’s contemporaries repented at the last moment.

On the contrary, the generation that drowned in the flood is taken as an example of a generation condemned by God (Luke 17:26-27; 2 Pet 2:5).

Second, “***made alive in the spirit***” seems to refer to the Resurrection. The question is whether Peter is talking about the activity of Jesus on Holy Saturday, when his soul descended to the dead without his body, or at some time after Easter Sunday, when his body and soul were forever reunited.

We’re left with several questions.

- Why did Christ to go and ***preach*** (offer his salvation) ***to the disobedient***?
- How can the disobedient be identified with the faithful souls waiting for Christ’s full redemption?

- Finally, why does Peter speak of Christ’s preaching only to those who died during Noah’s day? What about all the other dead from other eras.

No firm answer can be given at this stage.

B. Christ Proclaimed His Victory over Angelic Spirits who had disobeyed in Noah’s Day

Another interpretation – of more recent vintage – is based on a close comparison of 1 Peter 3:18-20 with *1 Enoch* and other non-biblical Jewish writings of the first century.

There was a widespread tradition based on Genesis 6:1–4 concerning the sin of some angelic beings and their “offspring” at the time of Noah and the flood.

In this tradition the Lord God condemns these angelic beings – commonly referred to as “spirits” – to be put in “prison” or “bonds,” because of their wickedness.

According to this interpretation, Peter is not speaking of Christ going to *human* souls at all but rather to these disobedient angelic spirits. He is not proclaiming the gospel but announcing his final victory over them.

One version of this understands Christ proclaiming his victory *between* his death and resurrection, but the more common view interprets “made alive in the spirit” to refer to his bodily resurrection.

In his risen state, while on his way to his enthronement in heaven, he went and preached to the spirits in prison, announcing not good news but final judgment (eternal damnation).

More likely, however, Peter is referring to Christ’s descent into the darkness and gloom of Hades, for that is where the disobedient

angels are kept in chains, according to other biblical texts that allude to this Jewish tradition (2 Peter 2:4; Jude 1:6).

Thus, in addition to liberating the righteous dead of the Old Testament for entrance into heaven, he also proclaimed himself Conqueror of evil to the infernal spirits whose power had just been shattered by his redeeming death (see ICSB on 1 Peter, pg 36).

II. THE FLOOD AND BAPTISM (1 PET 3:21-22)

Moving on from the narrative of Christ’s descent into Hades, Peter now applies the waters of the flood to us.

Noah and his family, having built the ark in faith, passed through the waters of judgment (1 Peter 3:20) into a new life and a new covenant with God (Gen 9:8-17).

So, too, Baptism is the sacrament of faith (Mk 16:16) that brings us new life (Rom 6:4) and makes us members of the New Covenant (CCC 1219).

Read: 1 Peter 3:21-22

[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 clear 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 subject to him.

A. Baptism . . . Saves You

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

This is the clearest statement in the New Testament that baptism brings us salvation. It is not only a sign of forgiveness and renewal, but an instrument of grace that actually regenerates (Jn 3:5; Titus 3:5).

The Greek word translated as **corresponds** means “the fulfillment of a type.” The raging waters of the flood that cleansed the earth of wickedness (Gen 7:17-24) prefigure the sacramental waters of Baptism that cleanse the believer of sin.

- The waters of the Flood are a figure or “type” of Baptism.

In both cases, the water that brings judgment on sin is also the water that saves.

B. Not as a Removal of Dirt from the Body (1Pet 3:21)

This clarification makes it certain that Peter is referring to the Sacrament of Baptism, an actual washing of the body that could be misunderstood because its effects on the soul are unseen (Heb 10:22).

C. A Clear Conscience

A “clear conscience” (literally, a “good conscience”), is similar in meaning to a pure heart; that is those who have a clear conscience are morally upright and pure.

By submitting to the waters of baptism we purify our souls by asking God to cleanse us within. It is God’s power that brings about a “clear conscience,” but by actively submitting to baptism we make an appeal to God to accomplish this in our hearts.

D. Appeal to God

The word “appeal” is better translated as “pledge,” where the “appeal” to God for a clear conscience is best understood as a pledge made to God at Baptism to maintain a clear conscience by living in accord with the Gospel.

- Thus, the sacrament not only cleanses the conscience of evil but it entails a solemn commitment to follow a Christian way of life.

E. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Pet 3:21)

In a final phrase Peter shows that the true power for salvation comes **through the resurrection of Jesus Christ**. It is not the water itself that saves, and even less our appeal or commitment to God; it is *God* who saves us through the resurrection of Christ.

F. Ascension into Heaven

Peter concludes with a proclamation, reminding us that Christ had been raised by the Father and that he **has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God**, with all the **angels, authorities, and powers subject to him**.

This is meant to give us confidence that our leader has finished the course, that he reigns **at the right hand of God** (see Psalm 110:1), and that he now has authority over all other powers, angelic and human, even those that unjustly abuse us now.

Three degrees of angels are mentioned (**angels, authorities, and powers**), that include all the angels, because the number three symbolizes totality.

G. The Right Hand of God

“And is at the right hand of God . . .”

Psalm 110:1 envisions the enthronement of the Messiah (Lord) in heaven beside Yahweh (LORD).

Every hostile opponent is then trampled underfoot – an idea that Peter connects with the subjugation of demons from the ranks of the **angels**, the **authorities**, and the **powers**.

Suffering and Doing the Will of God (1 Peter 4:1-6)

I. OVERVIEW

In this section Peter continues to call the Christian people to suffer in imitation of Christ.

Now he adds the requirement that we leave behind old patterns of life and prepare ourselves to be unfairly maligned by former associates.

Despite the abuse we may suffer in this life, God will judge everyone justly and bring vindication to his faithful ones.

Read: 1 Peter 4:1-6

[1] Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same thought, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin,

[2] so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer by human passions but by the will of God.

[3] Let the time that is past suffice for doing what the Gentiles like to do, living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry.

[4] They are surprised that you do not now join them in the same wild profligacy, and they abuse you;

[5] but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.

[6] For this is why the gospel was preached even to the dead, that though judged in the flesh like men, they might live in the spirit like God.

A. The Christian has Broken with Sin

What does Peter mean by saying that ***for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin?***

It plainly cannot mean that suffering in the flesh *per se* brings about an automatic end to sinning in the one who has suffered. This is obviously not the case.

While suffering in the flesh for Christ no doubt strengthens our resolve against sin, it does not guarantee that we will never sin again.

How then shall we understand Peter’s statement? It is verse 2 that gives us a key to verse 1: ***so as not to spend what remains of one’s life in the flesh on human desires but on the will of God.***

We are called to live out the remainder of our earthly life (life “in the flesh”) not by disordered human desires, but according to the will of God.

Peter is saying that when we stand up for what is good and are ready to suffer for it, we break with sin by refusing to live as the Gentiles do. Suffering for what is right produces in us greater freedom from sin.

Peter is not saying that we cannot sin once we have suffered for Christ, but that when we embrace our suffering in imitation of Christ, it contributes to a life of obedience to God.

B. Immoral Gentiles Practices

What characterizes the Gentile way of living? It is marked by ***licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry.*** This way of life must be shunned by the Christian.

What kind of behavior do these words describe?

- **Licentiousness** (RSV), **debauchery** (NAB), **sensuality** (ESV) = Immoral sexual behavior of all kinds.
- **Passions** (RSV), **evil desires** (NAB), **lust** (NIV) = encompass all forms of disordered desire that lead to sin.
- **Drunkenness, orgies/revels, carousing** = the kinds of wild parties – infamous in the ancient world – where indulgence in alcohol typically led to sexual immorality.
- **Lawless Idolatry** = the most grievous Gentile practice, the tacit or explicit worship of false gods, often coupled with immoral or lawless behavior.

Peter cautions that efforts to live heroic and holy lives can be a cause of persecution, that is, once the Gentiles discover that Christian purity is a moral protest against their own depravity.

C. The Gentiles Abuse the Converted

They are surprised that you do not now join them in the same wild profligacy, and they abuse you;

When former partners in riotous living see that Christians are no longer joining in, they are “taken aback” that the Christians have changed their views and eventually turn on them with verbal abuse (see Wis 2:12-14).

D. Why the Gospel Was Preached to the Dead

For this is why the gospel was preached even to the dead

This is another difficult passage: there are several interpretations but what follows is the most commonly accepted interpretation.

The “dead” are faithful Christians who have now died. They are Christians who in their lifetime heard and believed the gospel but have since died. They are “the dead” in the sense that they have now died.

Though they were condemned in the flesh (**judged in the flesh**) by their Gentile abusers (vs. 4-5) yet they **live in the spirit** because God has taken them to himself and will vindicate them of the final judgment.

Reflection and Application (4:1-6)

Peter divides the life of a Christian into two distinct parts:

- **the time that has passed** was marked by all kinds of sinful behavior;
- **The rest of the time in the flesh** is to be given over to doing the will of God.

The sins Peter names – sexual immorality, drunkenness, orgies - describe quite accurately the depraved behavior that is on the rise in our own society.

- Many of us have participated in these practices.
- We know their allure but also their profound emptiness.

Breaking with sinful patterns of behavior is never easy. As the Catechism states, “Sin creates a proclivity to sin; it engenders vice by repetition of the same acts.”

This results in perverse inclinations which cloud conscience and corrupt the concrete judgment of good and evil (CCC 1865).

Additionally, breaking with “friends” who have accompanied us in sinful patterns of behavior can be equally difficult, especially when they are offended by our refusal to continue to join them in disordered practices.

- Their scorn and name calling affect us deeply and cause wounds.

- This is precisely where we need the power of the Holy Spirit to animate us.

The power of God is not only our source for overcoming sin; it is also what enables us to be patient when we suffer for doing good (2:20) and to respond to those who abuse us with “gentleness and reverence” (3:16).

It is not enough merely to break with old patterns of sin. We are called as well to show the love of Christ to our old friends so that they too might come in the end to live in the Spirit and share our living hope in the Gospel.

Love, Hospitality, and Service in the Christian Community (1 Peter 4:7-11)

I. OVERVIEW (1 PETER 4:7-11)

Because Christ could return at any time, Christians must be prepared and ready when he does.

Peter discusses three practices in particular that should characterize Christians living in expectation of the “End.”

These practices are:

- Serious and sober prayer;
- Unfailing love for the brothers and sisters;
- Generous, ungrudging hospitality.

Read: 1 Peter 4:7-11

[7] The end of all things is at hand; therefore keep sane and sober for your prayers.

[8] Above all hold unfailing your love for one another, since love covers a multitude of sins.

[9] Practice hospitality ungrudgingly to one another.

[10] As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace:

[11] whoever speaks, as one who utters oracles of God; whoever renders service, as one who renders it by the strength which God supplies; in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

A. The End of all Things (1 Pet 4:7)

Is Peter declaring to the Christians of the first century that the world is certainly about to end?

No, he is reminding the Christian people that Christ may return at any time, and that they should be prepared and ready when he comes.

For Peter, the last days of God’s plan for the world have already arrived with the coming of Christ (1:20), and we are now living in those last days, awaiting their fulfillment.

- Christ has ushered in the final phase of history. We are already in the “End Times.”

However, terms like “the end of all things,” “the last days,” “the last hour,” or “the Day of the Lord” also point to that decisive moment in time when Christ will come again.

B. Prayer

The first of the three practices Peter mentions that ought to characterize Christians living in expectation of the end is to **keep sane and sober for your prayers**.

Seriousness and sobriety (temperance or moderation) are in direct contrast to the revelry and drunkenness that mark Gentile behavior and are vital for the effectiveness of our prayers.

We need to remain clear-minded and alert if we are to pray with true knowledge and effectiveness (3:7).

C. Christian Love

By saying “above all” Peter gives the second practice pride of place: **Above all hold unfailing your love for one another, since love covers a multitude of sins**. Peter underlines the fundamental place love holds in the Christian life.

What is Peter getting at when he says that **love covers a multitude of sins**?

This is a quotation from Proverbs 10:12. The Proverb contrasts the damaging effects of hate with the healing power of love, which builds up and restores relationships because it forgives the offenses of another.

Also, our practice of merciful love toward one another will prompt God himself to cover our offenses. In this sense one’s love results in our own sins being forgiven by God.

D. Hospitality

Hospitality is highly prized throughout the Scriptures. It is the day-by-day hospitality within the local body of Christians that Peter especially is addressing.

- This hospitality must be generously given without grumbling.

E. Spiritual Gifts

Peter now gives a general exhortation on using spiritual gifts (charisms or graces) for building up the church: **as each one has received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of God’s varied grace.**

These spiritual gifts are in particular the charismatic gifts (*charismata*) meant for the service of the community. St. Paul lists these classic spiritual (charismatic) gifts in 1 Cor. 12: 7-11).

The Second Vatican Council also spoke of these gifts in its *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (Apostolicam Actuositatem #3)*.

[T]he Holy Spirit . . . gives the faithful special gifts also (cf. 1 Cor. 12:7) . . . in order that individuals, administering grace to others just as they have received it, may also be "**good stewards of the manifold grace of God**" (1 Peter 4:10), to build up the whole body in charity (cf. Eph. 4:16).

From the acceptance of these charisms . . . **there arise for each believer the right and duty to use them in the Church and in the world for the good of men and the building up of the Church . . .** (*the emphasis is mine*).

Peter mentions only two distinct gifts here; speaking and serving. The “speaking” refers to the charismatic gift of prophecy mentioned by St. Paul (see 1 Cor 12:10).

Peter concludes by showing that the final goal of our words and deeds is always the glorification - that is, the honoring - of God himself.

Reflection and Application (4:7-11)

In two short of verses 10-11 Peter gives us a penetrating teaching on spiritual gifts. He maintains that “each one” has received a gift from God – gifts are not given to leaders only.

- Peter calls us to be “good stewards” of the gifts God gives and to use them to serve one another.

Peter shows that “gifts” (*charismata*) derive from “grace” (*charis*) but even more that we need to rely directly on God’s grace as we make use of the gifts.

- God is their ultimate source but also the one who supplies the ongoing grace needed to use them effectively.

We are stewards, not owners, and the gifts must be used for the good of the Church, not for ourselves. All this is neatly summed up in the *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* (#3), quoted above.

Peter underlines that the goal of these gifts is the glorification of God. This is tremendously important. Because of our fallen nature, there is a constant temptation to use the gifts we have been given, natural or spiritual, for our own glorification.

Yes, we want to honour God, but we also secretly want to enhance our own standing and reputation. Peter cuts right through this, leaving no room for us to boast in ourselves or to take our bow on stage.

He insists that we speak the words that come from God and that we serve by the strength that he supplies in order that God be glorified through Jesus Christ.

Preparation for Week 6

Sharing in the Sufferings of Christ (1Peter 4:12-19)

1. Read: ICSB, First Peter, Chapter 4:1-19
2. Review all Study Questions on Chapter 4, pg 40 in ICSB
3. Look up Scripture references.
4. Study *Memory Verse*.