

Fearless Suffering

1 Peter: Hope Away from Home

1 Peter 3:8-22

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A Dose of Encouragement

There are a number of parents in the room this morning. And even a few coaches. All good parents and coaches know that sometimes the best thing you can do to motivate right behavior is through encouragement. Sure, there's a need for instruction and correction, even telling it like it is or sharing heavy truth. But sometimes what we need most is encouragement, literally. We need to be given perspective that will give courage to do what we need to do. We need something to lighten our load.

And this applies not only to parenting or coaching. It also applies to discipleship. And that's what we find today in 1 Peter 3. Peter just finished a long section instructing Christians to live good lives among non-Christians (2:11-3:7). He's given us heavy truths. He's told us that we're called to submit to unbelieving people in authority over us. And that submission also leads to suffering at times.

But Peter's aware this instruction may be discouraging. And so now, as he seeks to summarize his argument, he pours on a heavy dose of encouragement to give strength for the task. He summarizes what he's covered from 2:11-3:7 with two sets of commands. But he also adds two points of encouragement along the way.¹

Verse 8, actually gives an additional set of commands. But we're not going to cover verse 8 this morning. I plan to pick it up next week.

1 Peter 3:8-22²

⁸Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. ⁹Do 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.

¹⁰For

*“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.”

¹³Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? ¹⁴But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, ¹⁵but 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, ¹⁶having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior

¹ Introduction adapted from David R. Helm. *1 & 2 Peter and Jude: Sharing Christ's Sufferings*, Preaching the Word.

² Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

in Christ may be put to shame. ¹⁷For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.

¹⁸For 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, ¹⁹in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, ²⁰because 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. ²¹Baptism, 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, ²²who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Like I said, this passage gives us two sets of commands that summarize Peter's instruction about submission. But he also gives two concluding encouragements.

BLESS UNBELIEVERS AND RECEIVE BLESSING FROM GOD (9-12).

First, bless others (that's the command) and receive blessing from God (that's the encouragement). The command in verse 9 actually has both a negative and a positive component. "Don't repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling" (that's the negative side). "But on the contrary, bless... (the positive side) that you may obtain a blessing."

What exactly is he calling us to do? Well, we know the churches he's writing to are suffering. Specifically, they're suffering insults and slander. They're being reviled. People in society are speaking evil against them. And so, there was a real temptation to want to retaliate. Mud has been thrown in their face. It only makes sense to sling mud right back at them, right? But instead, Peter calls them to bless those who are speaking poorly against them.

What does it mean to bless? Blessing has to do with God's favor and grace.³ So at the core, it's a desire for our enemies to receive God's favor and grace. It's a desire for others to have the very thing we have. The very thing they're mocking us for!

Remember the goal of this whole section? In 2:12 Peter says "Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation." The goal is for them to become Christians. The goal is for them to be won to Christ (cf. 3:1). So, when we bless unbelievers we desire for them to know God's grace. And we put this desire into action in two ways. Through our actions and our words. Lives and lips.

Actions

Over the last two weeks, we've seen how actions can be used to win others for Christ. Peter continues that theme in verses 10-12, in the quotation from Psalm 34.

Psalm 34 not only summarizes his call to bless and not curse, it also alludes to the life of David and provides us an amazing example of how to bless our enemies with our lives.⁴ Remember, when we

³ Thomas R. Schreiner. *1, 2 Peter, Jude*. The New American Commentary

Paul J. Achtemeier. *1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter*. Hermeneia commentary series

⁴ Helm

see an Old Testament quotation in the New Testament, we should seek to understand the quotation in its original context. Psalm 34 was written by David when he was running for his life from his enemy Saul. It was written when he was in exile in Philistia. He begins the Psalm with these words: “I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth.” This is amazing. Even when he’s being reviled, he’ll bless God. But David also blessed Saul with his actions.

David had at least two golden opportunities to get back at Saul and even kill him. But he didn’t. Let me share an example from 1 Samuel 24. David’s hiding from Saul in a cave, when Saul decides to take a potty break in that same cave. And while Saul’s doing his business, David sneaks up behind him with a knife. But instead of cutting his throat, he simply cuts off a corner of his robe.

After this, he calls out to Saul and tells him what just happened, how he spared his life. He said, “The LORD may avenge me against you. But my hand shall not be against you” (v. 12). And listen to what Saul said in return. Sounds a lot like 1 Peter 3. “You’re more righteous than I, for you’ve repaid me good, whereas I’ve repaid you evil ... So may the LORD reward you with good for what you’ve done to me this day” (vv. 17, 19).

This is the point Peter’s trying to drive home. We don’t take vengeance into our own hands. We trust that God will avenge us against our enemies. Our job is to do good to them, to bless them. And we do this with confidence that we ourselves have God’s blessing. We have hope that his promises are sure. We will reach our eternal reward. So, we bless our enemies and hope that God will bless them. We hope that God will show them his grace and favor.

This week, I read about a Christian soldier who’s a great example of this. He was living in a barracks with his company. And each evening before bed, he’d read his Bible and pray. There was another soldier who would revile him and insult him. One night, he threw a pair of muddy combat boots at the Christian. The next morning, the hostile soldier found his boots at the foot of the bed, cleaned and polished, ready for inspection. Several soldiers in this company eventually became Christians because of the witness of this man who could return blessing for insult.⁵

Words

But we not only bless others with our actions. We also bless our enemies with our words. We do this through prayer and evangelism.

Remember what Jesus said in Luke 6:27-28? “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” We can bless by praying that those who are now enemies of God and his people will one day have his favor, and be his friends!

We can also share the gospel with them. When people see our good deeds, it will lead some to wonder where we get hope that enables us to bless instead of curse. And when that happens, verse 15 tells us we need to “be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.”

We should not speak against those who revile us. But we’re not only called to hold our tongue. We’re also called to loose our tongue in blessing. We’re called to pray for them and to share the

⁵ Karen H. Jobes. *1 Peter*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament

good news of Jesus. The one who, even at the cross, while he was being reviled and crucified by his enemies said, “Father, forgive them” (Lk. 23:34).

We’re called to bless with the great encouragement that we have God’s blessing. We have God’s eternal favor because of Christ’s death. And we bless in hope that through our witness others may come to know this favor as well.

Let’s look now at the second set of summary commands and encouragement.

DO NOT FEAR ENEMIES, BECAUSE OF CHRIST’S VICTORY (13-22).

Do not fear your enemies, because of Christ’s victory.

The Command

The command is given in verses 14-15. Speaking of those who would harm Christians (v. 13), Peter says, “Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy.” This command is adapted from Isaiah 8:12-13. Isaiah is speaking to the southern kingdom who was facing tremendous opposition from the allied forces of the northern kingdom and Syria. And the threat of Assyria. Isaiah says don’t fear them, rather fear the LORD. He goes on to say that the LORD is a stumbling block to those who reject him, but a sanctuary to those who belong to him (v. 14).

The point is God will take care of his own. And God will eventually deal with his enemies and ours. He’ll bring them into judgment. Psalm 34 made the same point. His eyes and ears are toward the righteous (v. 15). But his face is against those who do evil (v. 16). When God’s face is toward us, we receive his blessing. When it’s against someone, they will receive his judgment.

This is a great encouragement. God will one day put this world to its rights. And he’ll bring us into his eternal kingdom (1:11). So, we don’t have to “fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both body and soul in hell” (Mt. 10:28). Our eternal security is based on the victorious work of Christ. This comes out in verses 18-22.

The Encouragement

These verses are surely the most difficult in the whole letter. Consider verse 19. Christ “went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison.” What does this mean? Where did Christ go? What did he proclaim? And who are the spirits in prison? Or think of verse 21 that says “baptism ... saves you.” This seems like a contradiction to our basic theology that we’re saved by grace alone through faith in Christ alone.

Well, I hate to disappoint you, but I probably won’t be able to finally settle what men and women much smarter than me have been debating for two thousand years. And the fact is that I don’t really want to, because I don’t want to lose the forest for the trees. And I’m convinced that there’s a really important forest in these verses that’s easy to see. Friends, the plain things are the main things in Scripture. And the plain and main thing in this passage is very encouraging. And we need the encouragement from the forest, not a scholarly lecture on the strange trees we find in the forest.

So what's the plain, main thing in these verses? It's the victory of Christ over all his enemies. And the victory we have because we're in him. Why do I say that? Well, because I think the structure and the context of this passage make it plain.⁶

Let's begin with the structure. The flow of these verses is plain. They trace the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. Verse 18 begins with Christ's suffering on the cross for sins. But even though he died in the flesh, he was raised to life in the Spirit. Then at the end of these verses, in verse 22, we're told that he has "gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God." That is, he ascended. And not only that, but now all "angels, authorities, and powers have been subjected to him." So although he was subject to unjust rulers at his crucifixion, he was vindicated by God at the resurrection and is victorious over his enemies following his ascension.

That's the plain structure of this passage. The victorious journey of Christ from death to resurrection and ascension.

And this throws needed light on one of the difficulties in verse 19. Who were the spirits in prison? And what did Christ proclaim to them?

The spirits are most likely angels, because the word "spirits" almost always refers to angels in the New Testament.⁷ But it's not speaking of good angels; it's speaking specifically of demonic spirits. You see, our battle is not only against flesh and blood, but "against rulers, against authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12). There have always been evil spirits that are behind all of the evil in this world.

That was true in Noah's day when there was great evil in the earth (Gen. 6:1-8). It was true in Peter's day. And it's true in our day. And so Peter wants us to know that after Christ's resurrection, as he was ascending to heaven, he proclaimed a future judgment on all evil spirits that oppose Christ and his church. Through his death and resurrection and ascension, he's put them all under his feet. He is victorious! And that should encourage us.

Which leads me to the second plain thing in these verses which comes from the context. These verses cite the work of Christ. But this isn't the first time Christ's work has been cited to encourage believers. This is the third time. The first two times only mention Christ's work on the cross and briefly his resurrection (1:18-21; 2:21-25). This is the first time Christ's ascension is mentioned. And so we know that his ascension is the emphasis here.

It's not just Christ's suffering that's emphasized. His victory is emphasized with very intentional language.

From 2:13 through 3:7, what's been the key word and the key theme? Submission to unbelieving authorities. "Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution" (2:13). "Servants, be subject to your masters" (2:18). "Wives, be subject to your own husbands ... even if some do not obey the word" (3:1).

But here in verse 22 we're give a pleasant surprise. We're told that all authorities and powers that are against Christ are now subjected to him! Instead of Christ being subject to unjust rulers, as he was before his resurrection, now all are subject to King Jesus!

⁶ Following Helm in the content that follows.

⁷ Schreiner and Jobes

This is meant to be extremely encouraging. How so? Well, here's the thing. If we're in Christ, his victory is our victory.

We're like Noah's family in Genesis 6-9. Even though we're surrounded by those who reject God and his Word, God has preserved a remnant of those who believe the promise of the gospel. Our enemies will be drowned in the waters of God's judgment. But believers will be saved. Not through the ark, but through Christ. We'll be raised with him. And we will reign with him.

This is a full view of salvation. Salvation not only includes our regeneration spoken of in chapter 1 (vv. 3, 23). Salvation not only includes our justification spoken of in v. 18 where the unrighteous are made righteous by the righteousness of Christ. Salvation also includes our glorification. We will be raised with him and will reign with him. Our enemies are defeated in Christ. This gives us hope.

And that's why Peter refers to our baptism in verse 21. It's not that baptism regenerates us. We've seen that in chapter 1. And our baptism doesn't take away our sin any more than it takes away dirt from our body. But it's an appeal to God. Our baptism represents our participation in the victory of Christ. It represents the death of Christ and the resurrection of Christ. And our baptism reminds us that we will go the way that Christ went. Though we suffer now, one day our warfare will be ended. Our baptism points to the truth of the great hymn about the church.

'Mid toil and tribulation,
And tumult of her war,
She waits the consummation
Of peace for evermore;
Till, with the vision glorious,
Her longing eyes are blest,
And the great Church victorious
Shall be the Church at rest.

This is quite encouraging! As Dave Helm says: "Christ was vindicated, and you shall be too." "Christ saw a great reversal of fortunes, and so shall you." "Christ [subjected] himself to the Father and now all things are subject to him."⁸

Our baptism points to this reality.

And this is the perspective we need if we're going to stand firm in the grace of the gospel; if we're going to keep our conduct honorable among unbelievers in a hostile world (2:12). If we're going to submit to unbelieving authorities (2:13, 18; 3:1).

Our good conduct may save those who oppose us. And it will certainly silence them (2:15; 3:16). Regardless, our salvation is sure. And so we press on with this great encouragement!

⁸ Helm