

Christ's triumph, our hope

- 1 Peter 3:18-22
- As Vic said last week, this book humbles us. It brings us to our knees because of our stubborn hearts and minds. It brings us to tears of joy over the suffering Christ endured for us, and tears of repentance for our complaining when we suffer. It humbles us. But it also causes us to rejoice. This is a difficult passage today, but the core message, I believe, is this: Christ's triumph is our hope. Let's look at this passage under three main points: Christ's triumph, God's patience, and Our hope.
- **Christ's triumph (verse 18)**
- This is the Gospel. Peter has been encouraging us to suffer well, and then he says, "For Christ also suffered." We suffer, but Christ suffered much more. When we suffer, the Lord makes his face to shine upon us, the Lord lifts up his countenance upon us, and gives us peace. But Jesus suffered alone, his Father's face turned away. Look at the truth of Christ's sacrifice.
- Christ suffered once for sins. Once. No more sacrifice is needed except that horrible and holy one. Salvation is not found in Jesus plus, but Jesus only. When the Reformers understood this in the 1500's, they could no longer participate in the Roman Catholic mass, which represents a bloodless sacrifice of Christ again for sin. The Westminster Confession calls this mass a form of idolatry. Christ cried from the cross, "It is finished!" And it is.
- The righteous for the unrighteous. That's the only way this works. The unrighteous (mankind) can do nothing for the righteous (God) that merits forgiveness. Jesus paid it all.
- That he might bring us to God. Only Christ can do that. "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ." -1 Timothy 2:5
- Being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit. This is a confusing verse unless we do a little digging to see what Peter meant and what the New Testament writers wrote about this. It does not mean the bodily resurrection is a myth and Jesus just came back to life as a spirit. Peter has mentioned the resurrection of Jesus in chapter 1 and he mentions it again here in verse 21. And remember, Peter was *there* when Jesus came back from the grave. In Luke 24, Jesus appeared to the disciples who were frightened and thought he was just a spirit, but he said, "See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." (Luke 24:39) Jesus was raised from the dead in his body. It was different, as ours will be, but it was a physical flesh and bones body. Paul wrote about our resurrection in Philippians 3:21. "(He) will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him to subject all things to himself." In the resurrection chapter, 1 Corinthians 15, Paul says our bodies are sown a natural body but raised a spiritual body! But to sum this verse up, Peter reminds us that Christ died once and for all and triumphed over death, sin, and the grave. Jesus Christ triumphed over all, and all angels, powers and authorities are subject to him. That leads us to...
- **God's patience (verses 19-20)**
- If verse 18 is a Rubik's cube, verses 19-20 are a 5000 piece jigsaw puzzle of a polar bear in a snow storm. We are in good company this morning if we admit that we really don't know what Peter is talking about here. John Piper said in an interview with Nancy Guthrie, "I don't understand this!" Martin Luther wrote, "A wonderful text is this, and a more obscure passage perhaps than any other in the New Testament, so that I do not know for a certainty just what Peter means."
- There are three interpretations, but two are predominant and less problematic than the third, so I will only mention them. One is preferred by men like Sam Storms, and the other is preferred by men like Wayne Grudem and John Piper. But none of those men would say that they *know* their position is correct. As Alistair Begg likes to say, "The main things are the plain things and the plain things are the main things." That's where we live. We can disagree about this passage and that's ok. It is not a main thing and certainly not a plain thing.

- The first interpretation is that “spirits in prison” refers to people who lived in the day of Noah and disobeyed what was being told them and are now in Hades or Sheol because of their unbelief. They are now spirits in prison. But when they were alive, the Spirit of Christ proclaimed the truth to them through Noah! God was patient, wasn’t he? For 100 years, as Noah built the ark, God waited. Wayne Grudem wrote in his book *Systematic Theology*, “Christ, ‘in spirit,’ was preaching through Noah to the hostile unbelievers around him.” In his second letter, Peter called Noah a “herald of righteousness.” (2 Peter 2:5). One who proclaims or preaches righteousness. How do we know that Noah did this work through the power of the Spirit? In the first chapter, Peter said the “Spirit of Christ” was speaking through the prophets in the Old Testament. Perhaps Peter believed the Spirit of Christ was preaching through Noah as well, as a very early prophet! Noah offered grace by the Spirit of God to the wicked men and women of his day, but they refused it.
- The second interpretation is that “spirits in prison” refers to evil angels who have been imprisoned. This would mean that Jesus sometime between death on Friday and resurrection on Sunday went to proclaim his triumph over them. Those who believe this view appeal to 2 Peter 2:4, where Peter writes, “For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until judgment...” I tend to agree with Grudem when he says this interpretation requires too many assumptions by the readers, too many leaps to make. There is no mention in the flood narrative in Genesis of angels who sinned during the building of the ark. But again, we cannot say for certain or build a church or a doctrine on the side we choose here.
- What can we take away from this with certainty? I would suggest that Peter is making the point that Christ has triumphed, for our sake, and the use of the story of Noah and the ark that saved 8 people from utter destruction is meant to encourage the faithful, no matter how few in number they are. That leads us to...
- **Our hope (verses 21-22)**
- “Baptism, which corresponds to this...” Corresponds to what? To Noah’s ark. Remember when we studied Genesis, and we talked about the ark being an archetype of Christ? It is a model or symbol or pattern in the Old Testament that points us to its fulfillment in the New. The ark was provided for sinners when there was no other hope for salvation. The ark was planned by God. The ark was a place of safety, the *only* place of safety. A man once said to D. L. Moody that he was worried because he didn’t feel saved. Moody asked, “Was Noah safe in the ark?” “Certainly he was,” the man replied. “Well, what made him safe, his feeling or the ark?” Christ, not our feelings, keeps us safe. He is our only safe place.
- Peter makes the point that the ark also points to baptism, but we have to be careful here. He said “baptism...now saves you.” If we jerk that phrase out of its context we end up with baptismal regeneration, which is heresy. Baptism cannot save us. If we look at the whole verse in its context, we understand these things. Baptism does not remove dirt any more than the ark brought Noah’s family to safety. It was a safe place from the storm, but it was God who brought 8 people through the storm and to dry ground. Baptism is a recognition by a redeemed sinner that our appeal is to God the Father through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The one who suffered once for sins and is now at the right hand of God and all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him. We are in a safe place in the arms of Jesus. In Moldova, one of the things I talked about was how important it is for a father to be a protector for his family. It is part of our calling as men. But ultimately, only God can protect us. Larry Warren shared the story of when he and his family lived in South Africa after apartheid was finished and Nelson Mandela was released from prison. There was a lot of unrest. Larry was driving his family to church one Sunday and Mary, pregnant with their third son, said about halfway there, “I don’t feel well. Can you take me back home?” Larry agreed and his two sons said they wanted to stay home with mom as well. So by the time Larry got to the church by himself, he was late and couldn’t sit in his normal seat, near the front, where his family always sat. He sat near the back, instead. The service had just started when gunmen armed with AK-47’s came into the church at the front, near the pulpit, and opened fire on the congregation. Then men came in from the back and rolled hand

grenades into the auditorium. A lot of people died. Larry said had they been on time, they would have died, as one of the hand grenades blew up right where they normally sit. Larry said to the men, "I could not have protected my family from that. Only God could do that. So when our third son was born, we named him Joshua, which means 'Jesus saves.'"

- I believe Peter shared this text in his letter to the dispersed people of God to say, "take heart! God can and will save his people." Noah and his family must have felt all alone, surrounded by the wicked. They were so few and the wicked were so many. Their voices were muted compared to the raucous cries of the ungodly. They were few but they were faithful. Just like the church Peter was writing to in the Roman Empire 2000 years ago. Just like the church today. He is calling the church to remain faithful, to put our trust in God and only God. "Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good." (1 Peter 4:19) Christ has triumphed, and he is our hope!
- Prayer: "Father, what we know not, teach us; what we have not, give us; what we are not, make us, for the sake of your Son our Savior."