

The Pilgrims' Triumph

1 Peter 3:18–22

The Sixteenth Sermon on First Peter

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This is one of the most difficult texts to interpret in the New Testament. Some take it as proof that Jesus descended into hell in his body after his death. Others take it was his preaching before his incarnation through Noah. Then there's a third way, which I'll hold for now and save the surprise, as I think it fits best with this text. Now, although it's a difficult passage, we can simplify by asking, "How does this text preach Jesus Christ?" I want you to see that here.

1. *Our "Triumph" is Ironic (v. 18)*
2. *Our Triumph is Not Ours (vv. 18–22)*
3. *Our Triumph is Assured to Us (vv. 20–21)*

Our "Triumph" is Ironic (v. 18)

Whole context is suffering. Again, as we saw last Lord's Day, it is the will of God that we suffer (2:21; 3:17). And suffering is used by God in his grace to confirm our lives to be like Jesus' life (2:19–21). And finally, suffering is a means of bearing witness to Jesus Christ (3:15–16).

So he says all this to us but then notice how verse 18 connects our suffering in the previous verses to Christ's suffering: **For Christ also suffered**. Our triumph is ironically the cross of Christ. And because of the cross Jesus Christ **bring[s] us to God**.

Our Triumph is Not Ours (vv. 18–22)

We do not triumph like a Roman general. It's not ours to triumph; it was Christ's to triumph and he did. And so he has brought **us to God**. How?

Notice that his suffering **once for sins** is linked with his **being put to death in the flesh** (v. 18). He was **put to death in the flesh**, that is, he died in the realm of this fallen world. In contrast Peter says **but he was made alive in the spirit**, meaning, the Holy Spirit has intruded into this age from the age to come to bring Jesus back to life and take him back to the age to come. Look at Romans 1:4. 1 Timothy 3:16. 1 Corinthians 15:45. So Peter is talking about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ here.

Now comes the hard part. At the resurrection Jesus was **made alive in the spirit** and then Peter says **in which** or “in whom,” meaning the Spirit, **he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison**. This is where the confusion begins. Notice what Peter says and what he does not say. He says in the power of the Spirit's resurrection **he went**. He does not say “he went down,” that's a different verb; but he simply says **he went**. Then verses 20–21 come as a parenthetical explanation. The thought **he went** gets picked back up down in verse 22 where Peter says **who has gone**. Stop there. I mentioned at the beginning that there are three ways to understand what is going on here. Here's the third way, the surprise I mentioned. The verbs behind our English **he went** and **who has gone** are the same. He's referring to the same event. So when did he do this “went-ing” and “going?” **Who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with**

angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him. What's that?

The ascension of Jesus Christ. Peter is talking about our triumph in Christ in terms of his death, resurrection, and ascension. And when he ascended that was when he **proclaimed to the spirits in prison**. The **spirits in prison** is never used of humans in the New Testament but of angels. All four verbs, then, was put to death in verse 18, was made alive in verse 18, and went in verses 19 and 22 are in the same grammatical form.

Do you see what this means? Not only did Christ accomplish a triumph to bring us to God but he also conquered his enemies. So why be afraid of your enemies?

Our Triumph is Assured to Us (v. 20–21)

But then Peter inserts this strange stuff about Noah's ark and baptism. He's saying this to assure us of our triumph in Christ. You see **in the days of Noah...eight persons were brought safely through water** (v. 20). While God judged all those under the water he brought his people safely through the waters of judgment. And then he connects that to us in terms of baptism saying, **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** (v. 22). It does not save because it **remov[es]...dirt from the body** but because through the resurrection of Jesus Christ you have

made a pledge of allegiance to Almighty God as your Father. Baptism is your vow to live for Christ because Christ not only lived for you but because he suffered for you, he died for you, he was given new life for you, and he ascended for you.