

THE TRIUMPH OF CHRIST'S SUFFERING

1 PETER 3:17-22

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

The Auca Indians from the jungles of eastern Ecuador (PROJECTOR ON--- ECUADOR) in South America had the reputation for being one of the most hostile Indian tribes in South America. Since the arrival of the Europeans centuries earlier, hundreds of outsiders had been killed by these fierce tribal people. In 1943 eight Shell Oil employees were exploring the region and were killed by the spears of the Aucas. (AUCAS)

For five missionary couples from three different missions groups these native people were needy prospects for the gospel. In 1955 they began to drop gifts from a plane to Aucas in one of their villages. When the missionaries discovered gifts left in return, they decided that the time was right to make face-to-face contact.

In January of 1956 the five husbands were ferried in by a small plane (CURARAY RIVER) to a makeshift landing spot on the Curaray River near one of the Auca villages. By nightfall the men had built a tree house. (TREE HOUSE) For the next several days the five spent most of the day by their makeshift landing strip. At night three of the men slept in the tree house while the other two flew back to their base. On the fourth day the missionaries had their first contact with the Aucas. (AUCA MEETING) Four Aucas showed up at the edge of the jungle and gladly accepted gifts. One of them even went on a short plane ride. After that trip, the four returned to the jungle.

Nothing happened on the fifth day. But on the sixth day the pilot in the group flew a reconnaissance mission and saw a larger group of Aucas headed their way. The missionaries at the home base never got the expected radio contact that afternoon from the missionaries on the river. That radio was silent in the days that followed. A ground search team, which included a *Time* magazine reporter and a *Life* magazine photographer, discovered the bodies of the missionaries along the river. (MISSIONARIES KILLED) Some of the men still had spears in their bodies. Five women were left without husbands, several children were left without fathers.

It is easy to understand the suffering of the wicked. It is hard to understand the suffering of the innocent. It is harder still to understand the suffering of the righteous. If we believe that following the Bible is pleasing to the God who is there, how do we explain the suffering of those who sincerely try to follow Him and His directions? (AUCA TRAGEDY) How do we explain it when bad things happen to good people, when bad things happen to God's people? I believe that our passage today from 1 Peter #3 provides at least a partial answer. (PROJECTOR OFF)

As we have seen from our study of 1 Peter, the apostle was addressing Christians in Asia Minor in the first century who were faced with suffering, much of it of the persecution variety. His purpose was to encourage them to persevere in the faith. Earlier in the letter Peter pointed to the example of Christ who was willing to suffer for mankind to the point of dying on the cross. The author regarded that suffering, which was endured so that people might have eternal life, as a reason that believers should endure suffering.

In this passage Peter again points to the example of Christ's suffering. This time he points to Christ's example to show that there is the promise to Christians that faithfulness in suffering will ultimately lead to triumph. This prospect of eventual triumph should motivate Christians to persevere in the face of suffering.

I.

This is one of the most difficult passages in the New Testament to interpret. Martin Luther centuries ago declared, **"A wonderful text is this, and a more obscure passage perhaps than any in the New Testament, so that I do not know for a certainty just what Peter means."** (*Commentary on Peter and Jude*, p. 168) One commentator (Erickson 1995:137) calculates that there are potentially 180 ways to fit the details of this passage together. The main difficulty centers on vv. 18-20. So we want to consider first THE POSSIBLE INTERPRETATIONS. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE POSSIBLE INTERPRETATIONS) I am going to describe the three primary ways in which this passage is interpreted. Each of these primary ways has variations.

1. The first view says that after the crucifixion, but before the resurrection, Christ went to Hades and preached a message to people who had lived during the time of Noah. (1. BEFORE THE RESURRECTION CHRIST PREACHED...) Hades is the place described in the Bible where all people in Old Testament times went when they died. There was a good part of Hades for genuine believers, and there was a bad place in Hades for unbelievers.

Some of you who have a church background where you were taught about creeds and confessions may remember this line from the Apostles' Creed: "**[He] was crucified, died and was buried; he descended into hell; on the third day he rose again from the dead...**" This creed, which was never actually adopted by any of the early church councils, accepts this interpretation of our passage.

A.

Some (1. A. SECOND CHANCE TO BE SAVED) who hold to this view say that the message which Christ preached in Hades to the people of Noah's day was an offer of a second chance to be saved eternally. I find that to be doubtful. There are passages in the Bible which suggest that our opportunities to be eternally saved lie only on this side of the grave.

B.

(1. A. B. ANNOUNCEMENT OF CONDEMNATION) Some say that Jesus in this trip to Hades, or Hell, announced condemnation to the unbelievers who lived during Noah's day.

C.

(1. B. C. ANNOUNCEMENT OF TRIUMPH) Some who hold to this basic view believe that Christ announced in this trip to Hades the good news of His triumph over death. This message was delivered to true believers who resided in the good part of Hades who had lived in Noah's day.

2.

(2. THE PREINCARNATE CHRIST PREACHED THROUGH NOAH) The second general view says that the preincarnate Christ preached through Noah by means of the Holy Spirit to people living at the time when the great flood took place. When Noah warned the people of his day to repent because of the coming judgment from God, the Son of God by the Holy Spirit was speaking through him. The people refused to listen. So now they are in the bad part of Hades. The famous early church leader Augustine held this view.

3.

The third basic view (3. CHRIST PROCLAIMED TRIUMPH TO FALLEN ANGELS IMPRISONED IN NOAH'S DAY) says that Christ proclaimed victory over death and the forces of evil to fallen angels who were imprisoned in the time of Noah. He presented this message to the imprisoned angels either after His death and before His resurrection, or after His resurrection, and perhaps before His ascension into heaven.

There have been good, Bible-believing Christians who have held to each of these three general views down through church history. So we need to be tentative in our conclusions. We also need to keep in mind that Peter's overall message is that the life of Jesus shows us that faithful endurance of suffering leads to ultimate triumph. That is the basic point.

II.

Let's look then at vv. 17 & 18 as we consider THE TRIUMPH OF CHRIST'S SIN-BEARING. (II. THE TRIUMPH OF CHRIST'S SIN BEARING) Peter writes, **"For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil. For 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..."**

The apostle recognizes that there are two kinds of suffering. There is suffering that results when we have done something wrong, and there is suffering that results when we have done something right. If we are going to suffer, it is better that it is for having done something that is right.

Christ set the example for us. Because of His suffering, forgiveness for the sins of mankind was accomplished. It was a triumph. If the suffering of Jesus was part of God's will, and it was, then we need to realize that sometimes our suffering may be according to God's will.

Notice v. 18. Christ the God-man **died**. (CHRIST THE GOD-MAN DIED...) I am using the New American Standard translation right now to break down this verse. He suffered to the point of physical death and spiritual separation from His Heavenly Father.

He also died **for sins**. (CHRIST THE GOD-MAN DIED FOR SINS...) A holy and righteous God must judge sin. The Bible says, **"The wages of sin is death."** (Romans 6:23) Because Jesus Christ was sinless--- because He was God as well as man, He was qualified to pay the penalty for the sins of other human beings.

Christ died--- for sins--- **once for all.** (CHRIST THE GOD-MAN DIED FOR SINS ONCE FOR ALL...) Tuesday is Yom Kippur in the Jewish calendar. It is the Day of Atonement. According to the Hebrew Bible, the high priest is to offer a sacrifice and sprinkle the blood on the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies. This was to cover the sins of Israel for another year. The claim of the Christian gospel is that Jesus provided a final sacrifice for sins. The shedding of His blood made the sacrifice of animals no longer necessary to cover the sins of humanity.

Thus in Hebrews #7 v. 27 (HEBREWS 7:27) we are told this about Jesus: **“He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself.”** Thus there is no further need for animal sacrifice.

Christ died (CHRIST THE GOD-MAN DIED FOR SINS ONCE FOR ALL THE JUST FOR THE UNJUST)--- for sins-- - once for all--- **the just for the unjust.** He was our substitute. We deserve to spend eternity apart from God because of our sin. But Christ’s death in our place gives us the opportunity to get out of that situation. His payment of our penalty is credited to our account if we choose to accept it.

Christ died (CHRIST THE GOD-.... SO THAT HE MIGHT BRING US TO GOD)--- for sins--- once for all--- the just for the unjust--- **so that He might bring us to God.** The purpose of Christ’s death is to bring us to God. Our sin raises a barrier of enmity between God and us humans. God is righteous and holy. We are not. But Christ’s suffering for us serves to bring us to God. Christ acts as our go-between. Salvation is not something that we can accomplish. Christ does it. The initiative lies with Him. He reconciles us to God.

Jerry Levin (JERRY LEVIN) was not seeking God. Although his grandfather had been a rabbi, he considered himself an atheist. He was also bureau chief for CNN in Beirut, Lebanon. On March 7, 1984, Levin was kidnapped by a group of Muslim radicals. In captivity his health suffered, and he lost thirty pounds. He began to think about life and death and God and Jesus and the faith of his wife, who was a Christian.

Levin requested a Bible, and his captors gave him one. He began to study it. Eventually he embraced the Jesus that he read about. In 1985 he managed to escape from his captors and make it to freedom. Looking back at his experience he said, **“If I could have come to faith in any other way, then fine. But I couldn’t. In captivity I experienced real deprivation. And yet that imprisonment is the one thing I absolutely don’t regret. Isn’t that ironic?”**

Another paradox! God used suffering in that unbeliever's life to bring him to faith in Christ. His suffering ultimately led to freedom and to the triumph of Christ's sin-bearing. (PROJECTOR OFF)

It is possible that there is someone here who is not truly a Christian, or who is not sure that if they died today that they would go to heaven. Perhaps you sense that God has brought difficult experiences across your path so that Christ might bring you to God. The one thing that you must do is to place your trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior. In your heart of hearts you need to recognize your spiritual lostness, and you must accept the sacrifice that Christ made in your behalf. You need to welcome Him into your life. If you would like to talk about that, let one of us know.

III.

Christ's suffering resulted not only in the triumph of sin-bearing but also in THE TRIUMPH OF CHRIST'S SERMON. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. THE TRIUMPH OF...) We find that in vv. 18-20. At the end of v. 18 the text says that Christ was put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit. There are many and varied analyses of these words, but it appears to most scholars today that the basic contrast is between Christ's death and His resurrection. He was put to death in His physical body, but He rose from the dead on the third day in His renewed spiritual body. That body had physicality, but it was a body transformed by the Spirit of God. So the message to Christians is that even though we may face suffering in this life, we will ultimately share in Christ's resurrection from the dead.

Verse 19 begins with "in which." I understand this to mean that in Christ's resurrection body He made some kind of proclamation. This understanding would assume that it was sometime after His resurrection that Jesus made this proclamation.

At that time Christ **"went and proclaimed--- whatever that message was--- to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared..."**

We now have to determine who "the spirits" are. By checking out how the word "spirits" is used in the New Testament, we discover that when the term stands alone, it is never used to refer to human beings. Also in v. 20 a different word is used to refer to human beings. That word is "souls," though it is translated here as "persons." Everywhere else in the New Testament the word "spirits" refers to angels.

In this context the author is talking about disobedient, or fallen, angels who are elsewhere in the New Testament called demons. What evidence do we have about fallen angels in the time of Noah?

In 2 Peter #2, beginning in v. 4 (2 PETER 2:4), we find this passage: **“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 the judgment; (2 PETER 2:5) if he did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven others when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly...”**

The word translated here as “hell” is actually the word “Tartarus.” It appears only this one time in the New Testament. So we do not know if this is the same compartment of Hades where all of the unbelievers who died in Old Testament times were sent, or if this is a separate compartment. But Peter in this second text does seem to describe the same situation as the one in our passage, and he calls the prison of 1 Peter 3 “Tartarus.”

In the Book of Jude, which is a short little one chapter book (JUDE 6) that appears right before Revelation, v. 6 says, **“And the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day...”** The same fallen angels may well be in view here. Notice that they are said to have abandoned their proper abode.

Verse 7 (JUDE 7) adds, **“...just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.”**

The primary problem with the behavior of people in Sodom and Gomorrah was sexual sin. The author of this passage suggests that the angels of Noah’s day somehow had involvement with that sin. In the gospels Jesus says that the angels neither marry nor are given in marriage. But the Bible also indicates that angels can take on the form of human beings, and fallen angels, at least, can possess people. So to say that these angels were involved in some kind of illicit sexual conduct is perhaps not ruled out.

We need to look then at a passage in Genesis #6 that describes the conditions leading up to the time of the great flood. (GENESIS 6:4). In Genesis #6 vv. 4 & 5 we are told, **“The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of man and they bore children to them. These were the mighty men who were of old, the men of renown. (GENESIS 6:5) The**

Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.”

Verse 2 in the same chapter (GENESIS 6:2) adds, **“...the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive. And they took as their wives any they chose.”**

The specific term “sons of God” is used elsewhere in the Old Testament only in the Book of Job. It clearly refers there to angels. So it seems to me reasonable to conclude that fallen angels--- demons--- took on the form of men and co-habited with women. Perhaps Satan was trying to mess up the strain of humanity by bringing demons into the picture.

Jewish writings outside of the Bible which come from the general time of Jesus reflect this understanding of what happened in Noah’s day. One of these writings is called 1 Enoch, named after the character described in Genesis #5. (1 ENOCH 6:1-3) In section 6 of this Jewish work we are told, **“And it came to pass when the children of men had multiplied that in those days were born unto them beautiful and comely daughters. And the angels, the children of the heaven, saw and lusted after them, and said to one another: 'Come, let us choose us wives from among the children of men and beget us children.'”** The story goes on and gives further details of what supposedly happened.

The flood came soon after this, and only Noah and his family survived. Apparently these disobedient spirits or angels or demons were locked up at that time in this place called Tartarus. After His crucifixion Christ in His new body went to Tartarus and made a proclamation to the residents there.

Probably He announced His victory on the cross and His resurrection to them and told them that their ultimate doom was sealed. (COLOSSIANS 2:15) Colossians #2 v. 15 may tie in with this. Paul, speaking about the crucifixion, says, **“He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.”**

So our Lord experienced suffering, but there was victory that came out of that suffering. The penalty for sin was paid, and victory over the evil spirits was proclaimed. This was the triumph of Christ’s sermon.

IV.

In v. 21 we find a description of THE TRIUMPH OF CHRIST'S SALVATION. (IV. THE TRIUMPH OF CHRIST'S SALVATION) **"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..."**

The flood was a picture of baptism. The floodwaters were a means of judgment for the wicked and a means of salvation for Noah and his family as they were preserved by the ark. Likewise, the water of baptism symbolizes the washing away of sin in judgment and the salvation of the believer as he or she is preserved in Christ. Lest anyone think that the act of water baptism itself accomplishes this, Peter says, **"...not as a removal of dirt from the body..."** It is not the physical act of water baptism itself that saves, but rather what it symbolizes: **"but as an appeal to God for a good conscience..."**

The word "appeal," which could also be translated "pledge," was a word that was used in those days in the signing of a contract. The question was asked, **"Do you pledge to obey and fulfill the terms of this contract?"** The signer of the contract was obligated to say "yes."

In a similar way, new believers who were about to be baptized in the early church were asked a series of questions. Usually they were asked something like this: **"Do you pledge to obey God and break from the sinfulness of your past life?"** Assuming that the answer was positive, the water baptism became a kind of seal of a contract given by a good conscience toward God.

Still water baptism is only a symbol. It symbolizes the eternal salvation that Christ has brought about in our lives. As a result of Jesus' suffering, He triumphed in providing us with individual eternal salvation in Him.

V.

The fourth triumph that resulted from Christ's suffering was THE TRIUMPH OF CHRIST'S SUPREMACY. (V. THE TRIUMPH OF CHRIST'S SUPREMACY) The end of v. 21 mentions the resurrection of Christ. Verse 22 makes reference to the ascension: **"...has gone into heaven."** The story is thus complete: death, resurrection, and ascension.

Having gone into heaven, Christ is at the right hand of God. That is a position of power and authority and supremacy. The expression "right hand of God" goes back (PSALM 110:1-2) to Psalm 110 vv. 1 & 2,

which say, **“The Lord says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.’ The Lord sends forth from Zion your mighty scepter. Rule in the midst of your enemies!”**

Is there a reference to enemies in our passage? Consider v. 22: **“...who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.”** Jesus suffered a cruel death upon a Roman cross at the hands of Jewish and Gentile enemies. Behind them, demonic forces were at work. His body was put in a tomb. From all outward appearances righteousness had suffered a horrible defeat. (PROJECTOR OFF)

But good wins no final victory except out of the jaws of apparent defeat. On the third day Christ rose bodily from the dead. Then later He ascended into heaven--- thus triumphing over the evil forces and spirits of wickedness who were responsible for His death. Thus our Lord ascended to His position of supremacy at the right hand of His Heavenly Father. The suffering of Jesus was ultimately followed by the triumph of Christ’s supremacy.

We should not be surprised when we encounter suffering in our Christian walk. It is part of a life lived with God. Noah experienced suffering. For 120 years he toiled away on his monstrous ark. People laughed at him and mocked him and made fun of him. But he persevered in the face of suffering, and he ultimately triumphed because of that persevering faith in God. He was delivered through the flood.

Our Lord suffered to the point of dying by the most painful form of execution known in the world of His time. It was a humiliating and painful death. But good wins no final victory except out of the jaws of apparent defeat. Out of His suffering came triumph--- the triumph of Christ’s sin-bearing, the triumph of Christ’s sermon, the triumph of Christ’s salvation, and the triumph of Christ’s supremacy. Our Savior’s example shows us that the faithful endurance of suffering ultimately leads to triumph.

Revelation #11 describes an incident that occurs during the seven year tribulation. The text tells us that two witnesses will boldly proclaim the gospel from Jerusalem. These two individuals will prophesy and testify for God and Christ for 3 ½ years. They will face much opposition. But if anyone desires to harm them, the two witnesses will have supernatural power to destroy them. They will also have power to stop the rain, turn water into blood, and send plagues upon the earth.

At the end of this period the Bible says that the Antichrist will rise up to fight against them. He will overcome them and kill them. Their bodies will lay in the streets of Jerusalem. The evil will rejoice and will send one another gifts because these tormentors have been destroyed.

Outwardly it will appear that evil has triumphed. Righteousness has been dealt a humiliating defeat. But, you see, good wins no final victory except out of the jaws of apparent defeat. After 3 ½ days the two witnesses will rise from the dead. Revelation #11 says that in front of their watching enemies these two men will rise from the dead and ascend into heaven, bringing terror upon all who are watching them.

VI.

Consider finally THE TRIUMPH OF OUR SUFFERING. (PROJECTOR ON--- VI. THE TRIUMPH OF OUR SUFFERING) The *Life* magazine photographer and *Time* magazine reporter who were part of the search team that found the bodies of the five missionaries along the Curaray River in Ecuador recorded what was apparently a horrible defeat for the cause of Christian missions in South America. But faithfulness in the face of suffering leads ultimately to triumph. And good wins no final triumph except out of the jaws of apparent defeat.

A few years later a widow of one of those missionaries and a sister of another were able to move into one of those Auca villages. Today the vast majority of the Auca Indians, called more often the Waorani, are followers of Jesus. The son of one of those missionaries grew up in one of the villages. His children grew up there. They became close to the man who killed their grandfather. They came to call him "Grandfather." This Auca man became a committed follower of Jesus, living proof of the triumph of perseverance in the face of suffering.

Three of the martyred missionaries were graduates of Wheaton College in Illinois. On the day that the tragedy was announced at their chapel service scores of students vowed to commit their lives to missionary service.

The widow who went to live among the Aucas was Elisabeth Elliot. She wrote a book entitled *Shadow of the Almighty*. (SHADOW OF THE ALMIGHTY) That book was used to prompt many more to commit their lives to the cause of world missions.

Years ago I led a discipleship group of young single adults. One of the books that we used in our study was *Shadow of the Almighty*. One of the young men was so affected by that book that he began to pursue a missionary career. Eventually he went to Thailand and moved in with a tribal group that had no previous exposure to the gospel, learned their language, and was involved in translating the Bible into their Pwo Karen language. Today there are churches among this people group in northwest Thailand.
(PROJECTOR OFF)

Some of you may have experienced some measure of suffering because of your commitment to Jesus Christ. For others of you suffering has come from family addictions or emotional struggles or job stresses or personal relationships or health problems or death. But by virtue of your commitment to Jesus Christ you are part of the great cosmic struggle between good and evil. These issues and difficulties are battlegrounds upon which the cosmic war is fought.

The question is: Will we persevere in the fight? Will we hang in there, even when the going is tough? The example of Jesus tells us that we need to persevere. We should not give up. For good wins no final victory except out of the jaws of apparent defeat. The faithful endurance of suffering always leads to ultimate triumph.