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Living as a Sacrifice, Part 3

A “Pie in the Sky” Hope?

During his third missionary journey, Paul was faced with many problems on the part of the Corinthians, both in their theology and practice. One such problem revolved around the teaching of some in the body which denied the possibility of resurrection. The thought of God raising people from the dead seemed fanciful to them.

In addressing this, Paul used a *reductio ad absurdum* argument in which he demonstrated the

folly to which such a view lead. We pick it up in verse 13.

1 Corinthians 15:13-18, “But if there is no resurrection of the dead [and here is the absurdity of the position- ‘then’...], not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, // your faith also is vain. Moreover we are even found *to be* false witnesses of God, because we witnessed against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; // you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.”

Talk about a gloomy doctrine! To those who denied the biblical doctrine of the resurrection, it may simply have been on account of a dualistic struggle which held that God, being pure spirit, could have no dealings with the physical world. Yet such a view, if logically brought to its end, denied so much which *they themselves as Christians held dear!* In this regard, notice Paul’s climax — it is like a sunbeam on a gloomy day,

1 Corinthians 15:20a, “But now Christ has been raised from the dead...”

This means all the gloomy consequences just referenced are swept away! Truly, the resurrection is NOT a “pie in the sky” doctrine, BUT the foundation of Christianity!

The section we are looking at this morning contains a similar theme. It was written to demonstrate that the blessing given to those persecuted on account of Christ is NOT a “pie in the sky” doctrine, BUT a sure and certain hope! Recall Peter’s teaching at the beginning of this section.

1 Peter 3:13-14, “And who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, *you are* blessed, // [so] do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled.”

From this we saw the glorious truth that though we might find ourselves in the fire of affliction on account of Christ, nevertheless the flames can neither hurt nor rob us, vv. 13-14a! And so we need not fear nor ought we to be troubled, v. 14b!

Yet is this really true? Or is this just “pie in the sky”? The close of our passage is devoted to proving these statements! Truly, our suffering is NOT in vain! Striving to be a witness for Christ in the midst of the fire of affliction DOES have eternal consequences! And Peter demonstrates this four different ways in vv. 18-22.

We can have confidence as Christians that all righteous suffering will result in blessing, first on account of the example of Christ.

1 Peter 3:18a, “For Christ also died for sins once for all, *the* just for *the* unjust, in order that He might bring us to God...”

At the outset, I want to draw your attention to the fact that we are looking at an amazing summary of what Christ did on the cross! As a result, it is tempting to miss Peter's point here and just focus on what it says about Christ's cross-work. Toward this end, look at the text. On the cross, Christ:

- Died for our sins — that means all of them!
- Once for all! That means if you have received the forgiveness of Christ, there could never be any condemnation since Christ's sacrifice of Himself was/is sufficient to cover ALL our sins. Nothing else is needed!
- Was a substitute — the just [died] for the unjust! In other words, He went in our place. He paid our penalty such that everyone trusting Christ received the life He earned by His perfect obedience.
- Brought us to God! We are born as sinners and therefore alienated from God! Yet through His death, Christ reconciled us to God such that we have become His children!

Now, as much as we might want to discuss all of this and more when it comes to Christ's redeeming work, that is NOT the point of Peter's teaching here. RATHER, his point was to demonstrate the impact that earthly suffering had in Christ's life! As He is the first man — the trailblazer — that which we someday will be like — notice the impact that the greatest suffering this world has ever witnessed — the cross of Christ — had on our Lord.

1 Peter 3:18b, "...having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit."

This is NOT saying that Christ never actually died on the cross. It is NOT saying that He remained a living being even in the grave. In the grave, just like you and me someday, Christ was a dead individual which by definition is the rending of the soul from the body (cf. James 2:26). So, though we are going to die someday, our spirit will remain alive. As that is the case, it seems strange that Peter here would attribute to Christ what we all remain in death: a living spirit. Obviously, that is NOT what Peter is saying here.

So, what is Peter saying? In His death Christ entered into a new realm of existence — which ultimately was/is the beginning of the final state! In contrast to our fallenness (which adheres to our "flesh") and this fallen world, Christ rose unto a heavenly, physical existence (which is the essence of "eternal life" — life pertaining to the age to come)!

Peter Davids put it this way,:

Peter is not contrasting two parts of the nature of Christ, body and soul, a Greek distinction that would be read into this passage in the Fathers... but rather two modes of existence, as an examination of the passages cited would show [John 5:21; Romans 4:17; 8:11; 1 Corinthians 15:22, 36, 45 (cf. 2 Corinthians 3:6; Galatians 3:21)]. Christ died for sin; therefore he died with respect to flesh, which in the NT is the mode of existence of unregenerate humanity. But he died as a whole person, not simply as a body (another

meaning of “flesh”). Christ was made alive... because of his relationship to God; therefore he was made alive with respect to the spirit, the mode of existence of the regenerate or those pleasing to God. (Davids, 1990, p. 137)

From this, understand Peter’s point: The trials, miseries, sufferings, persecutions, and death of this world CANNOT and DID NOT thwart or hinder the life that Christ entered into upon His death! And if that is true of our Lord, it most certainly will be true of His servants!

Romans 6:9-11, “Christ, having been raised from the dead [having entered into a new realm of existence], is never to die again; death no longer is master over Him. For the death that He died, He died to sin, once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God.”

Because of Christ’ new realm of existence, this state of sin and misery has no power over Him for He cannot die! What impact does this truth have on us?

Romans 6:8, “Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him.”

In other words, Christ’s victory over the worst that this world could throw at Him is our victory as well. As such, we need no longer fear trial, difficulty, or death! For in Christ, we have and will overcome!

How glorious! All that Christ underwent at the cross in no way limited or inhibited the life that He entered into through His resurrection! And because we are in Christ, we understand that trial/difficulty — as with our Lord — cannot touch us or take from us anything of real value!

And yet, it gets even stronger here. For not only did Christ’s suffering NOT inhibit His life, BUT through His death He gained an unimaginable victory!

1 Peter 3:19-20a, “In which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits *now* in prison, who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah...”

With this we have stumbled on to an interpretive challenge which makes certainty as to what Peter is talking about here incredibly difficult. In the words of Martin Luther:

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. (Luther, 2005, p. 166)

There are upwards to a dozen different interpretations of what Peter is saying in this passage — five of the most common are these:

- When Noah was building the ark, Christ ‘in spirit’ was in Noah preaching repentance and righteousness through him to *unbelievers who were on the earth then* BUT NOW are ‘spirits in prison’ (people in hell). (Augustine’s view)

- After Christ died, He went and preached to *people in hell*, offering them a second chance of salvation. (The Lutheran view)
- After Christ died, He went and preached to *people in hell*, NOT offering them salvation, BUT proclaiming to them that He had triumphed over them such that their condemnation was final!
- After Christ died, He went to purgatory and proclaimed release to *people who had repented just before they died in the flood*. (The Roman Catholic view)
- After Christ died (or: after He rose but before He ascended into heaven), He proclaimed triumph over the *fallen angels* who had sinned by marrying human women before the flood (cf. Genesis 6:1-2). (This is the most common view among Reformed commentaries today)

My view, after a rather fun week of study, is the last one. Yet honestly, as it relates to Peter's point in this text, it really doesn't matter¹ (so let's not get side-tracked here)! What is Peter's point with this statement? Simply that after His death Christ in some way proclaimed the sovereignty of His glory or grace (depending on your view) to ones who for now will remain an unidentified people! Of this almost all commentaries agree!

And so, looking at Christ, our forerunner and Lord, we see the impact that the sufferings, miseries, and persecutions of this life had on Him. And what was the impact? Not only could the things of this life NOT hinder Christ's victory (and so His future life), BUT IN HIS DEATH, He demonstrated the greatness of His glory!

And where this becomes important for us is in understanding once again that: "As the Master went, so also shall we upon our death." In Christ we truly are "more than conquerors."

Romans 8:35-39, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, 'For Thy sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered.' But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

So, it is quite true that "He is no fool in this life to give up what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose"²! So yes; persecution was coming to the people of God- a persecution whose severity would defy imagination (many would die)! Yet as it was with their Savior, so it would be with them and us! Anything and everything this world can throw against the Christian can do nothing to harm or limit our life in Christ! "Momentary, light affliction" truly will produce for us "an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison!" (2 Corinthians 4:15)

At this point, Peter easily could have given the benediction and gone home. Yet he doesn't! Rather, he gives three more words of encouragement to bolster his brethren that they might "play the man" — as they soon would be threatened by torture, imprisonment, and death!

We can have confidence as Christians that all righteous suffering will result in blessing on account of the example of the redeemed in Noah's day. Focusing on Noah, Peter here makes a very important point. Speaking of the "beings now in prison", he wrote this:

1 Peter 3:20, "Who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through *the water*."

I challenge you to find another time in redemptive history and even Church history when the world was more corrupt, wicked, and given over to sin than in the days of Noah. Recall the description that precedes the account of Noah and the Ark:

Genesis 6:5, "Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually."³

Talk about a dark time! The entire world was not only darkened in their sin but had given themselves over to it — such that "every intent... was only evil continually"! And that is the point of the text before us: "the days of Noah" were really bad! In and throughout this time, Noah labored 120 years to build the ark in the face of ongoing persecution, attacks, and mockery — the very things Peter's contemporaries were about to experience at the hands of Rome! Yet in spite of the mockery, attacks, and persecution, in the end what happened to Noah and his family? The text before us says that they, "...were brought safely through *the water*"! Did you get that? No matter how bad it got in Noah's day, no matter how much they attacked Noah and made light of him, in the end, God saved him!

And if God was able to do that for Noah, Peter's point here is that God will do that for you and me as well! In fact, no doubt reflecting on this, Peter repeated the point in 2 Peter.

2 Peter 2:5, 9a, "For if God... did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a preacher of righteousness, with seven others, when He brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly... 9 *then* the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation..."

Truly, we can have confidence that any and all righteous suffering that we could endure will result in blessing secondly on account of the triumph we see in Noah! Talk about *Contra Mundum*... "Eight people" standing for truth against a very evil world that hated them. How possibly could they survive? Yet survive they did! In fact, through their ministry, God furthered His redemptive program on this earth!

Hebrews 11:7, "By faith Noah, being warned *by God* about things not yet seen, in reverence prepared an ark for the salvation of his household, by which he condemned the world, and became an heir of the righteousness which is according to faith."

Again, if God could do this with Noah, He most certainly will do it with you! Wayne Grudem put

it this way speaking of our text in 1 Peter:

This passage, once cleared of misunderstanding, should also function today as an encouragement to us to be bold in our witness (as Noah was), to be confident that, though we may be few, God will certainly save us (as he did Noah), and to remind us that just as certainly as the flood eventually came, so final judgment will certainly come to our world as well, and Christ will ultimately triumph over all the evil in the universe. (Grudem, 2009, p. 169)

It is in light of this truth that Paul could make such a bold claim, as in Romans.

Romans 5:3-5, “And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint [IOW, it is NOT “pie in the sky” to believe that persecution ultimately can’t harm us or rob us of anything important. Why?] because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.”

Truly!

Romans 8:31, “...if God is for us, who can be against us?”

References

- Davids, P. H. (1990). *The First Epistle of Peter (The New International Commentary on the New Testament)*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Grudem, W. A. (2009). *1 Peter (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (IVP Numbered))*. Chicago: IVP Academic.
- Luther, M. (2005). *Commentary on Peter & Jude (Luther Classic Commentaries)*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Classics.

End Note(s)

¹ As to other theological considerations, some of the views just referenced most certainly matter; but I won't get into that.

² Quoted by Jim Elliot.

³ cf. also Genesis 6:11-13.