

It is more profitable to know Jesus than to know about Him.

Weekly Edition – January 22, 2016

First Letter of Saint Peter

Suffering for Doing Good

⁸ Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. ⁹ Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. ¹⁰ For,

*“Whoever would love life
and see good days
must keep their tongue from evil
and their lips from deceitful speech.*

¹¹ *They must turn from evil and do good;
they must seek peace and pursue it.*

¹² *For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous
and his ears are attentive to their prayer,
but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”*

¹³ *Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? ¹⁴ But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. “Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.” ¹⁵ But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶ keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. ¹⁷ For it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. ¹⁸ For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit. ¹⁹ After being made alive, he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits—²⁰ to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, ²¹ and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.*

Be Like-Minded

- 1) Peter's command to us to be like-minded is a call to place the interest of the community, of our faith family, ahead of our own self-interests. More so, it is a call to develop such spiritual attentiveness that we come to perceive our vested self-interest only through the lens of what is in the best interest of the body of Christ.
- 2) Any self-interest apart from what is best for the community is rooted in pride which is sin.
- 3) Jesus Christ gave His life for the church (Ephesians 5:25) – for the community. As we are joined into His body, into community, we are to lay down our lives for one another.
- 4) Peter is saying that we who are in Christ are to share in the same disposition. Within our faculty of perceiving and judging, we are to be concordant, harmonious. Be of one mind. It is a call to unity.
- 5) We cannot enter into like-mindedness unless we possess an attitude of Godly submission – one to another. My “I” must yield to our “we.” There is no “I” in team, the saying goes, and Peter instructs that in God's economy the interests of the team must take precedence over the individual.

Outline of 1st Peter

1. **Opening Remarks** (1:1-2)
2. **Dignity of the Christian Life**
 - a. New birth in Christ (1:3-9)
 - b. Testimony of the Prophets (1:10-12)
 - c. Be Holy Yourselves (1:13-2:3)
 - d. Christ the Living Stone (2:4-10)
3. **Duties of the Christian Life**
 - a. Civil duties of the Saints (2:11-17)
 - b. Suffering like Christ (2:18-25)
 - c. Household duties of the Saints (3:1-7)
 - d. Moral duties of the Saints (3:8-12)
4. **Difficulties of Christian Persecution**
 - a. Conduct during Persecution (3:13-22)
 - b. Living for the Last Days (4:1-11)
 - c. Suffering and Christian Glory (4:12-19)
 - d. Shepherds and the Flock (5:1-5)
 - e. Humility and Vigilance (5:6-11)
5. **Closing Benediction**

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Always Be Ready to Give an Answer

- 1) Peter notes that when we live our lives in radical submission before God and neighbor, others will take note. It is so completely and utterly different than anything else, that it is literally shocking!
- 2) Choosing the path of suffering for doing good, or bearing insult graciously is pure insanity to those who do not know the love of God as expressed in Jesus Christ our Lord.
- 3) It will generate questions. These others will press us to explain the basis of our hope and joy. It appears to be sheer madness in terms of the expected way – the way of this fallen and sinful world.
- 4) Always be ready to explain the basis of your hope. But do this with gentleness and respect, (verse 15) keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

Suffering for Doing Good

- 1) As Jesus Christ, the righteous One who was without sin, willingly took the upon Himself the penalty for you and me – and for the sin of the whole world, the unrighteous ones, so in Christ we are invited to “fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the affliction of Christ” (Colossians 1:24) and we enter into this when we suffer persecution, evil or insults on account of our doing good.
- 2) Peter points out that it is better to suffer for doing good which is undeserved (as opposed to suffering for doing evil which warrants punishment) *if it is God's will*. It is an important qualifier.
 - a) We are not called to seek out suffering for suffering's sake. That is a perversion of Scripture and a wrong spirit. There is no Scriptural call to a morbid asceticism, of punishing the body as a way of attainment of spiritual blessing.
- 3) Our whole focus should be on God, and if we live in radical submission to Christ, there will be more than enough persecution sent our way. The enemy loves nothing more than taking down a servant of Jesus Christ in a heap of humiliation and disgrace. A highly public fall from grace discredits the faith, and brings joy within the dens of hell.

Put to Death in the Body but Made Alive in Spirit

- 1) Christ was crucified, died and buried for me and my sins – and for the sin of the whole world. His body died, but His spirit was made alive.
- 2) This is not a call to disrespect the body; on the contrary we are to take good care for our bodies as Paul taught us:
 - a) *Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.* (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)
- 3) Rather Peter is urging us to get our priorities right before God. I am not to fear those who can kill the body, but to greatly reverence and fear Him who can destroy body and soul! (Luke 12:4-5)
- 4) Isaiah, speaking by the power of the Holy Spirit, said, ¹² “*Do not call conspiracy everything this people calls a conspiracy; do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it.* ¹³ *The Lord Almighty is the One you are to regard as holy, He is the One you are to fear, He is the One you are to dread.*” (Isaiah 8:12-13)
- 5) Peter says that when I revere the Lord in my heart (verse 15) I gird myself with hidden interior strength that will be drawn upon during these times.

Noah and the Flood

- 1) The account of Noah and flood teach us about God's judgment and His abiding steadfastness in always preserving a remnant of the faithful in covenant fellowship.
- 2) Some today teach that the story of Noah and the Flood are myths meant to convey an essential truth. Jesus doesn't treat Noah as a myth but uses the example of the days of Noah to instruct His followers. (see Matthew 24:37-38 and Luke 17:26-27)

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- 3) Before we can properly explain what Peter is saying in verses 19 and 20, we must first examine a difficult question – namely, what happened to Jesus during the three day period between His death and His resurrection?
- 4) Scripture teaches that when Jesus died, His body and His soul were separated (only to be reunited again, body and spirit, when Jesus was resurrected from the dead). He had nail holes in His hands when the resurrected Jesus showed Himself to Thomas. (John 20:27)

Christ's Descent into Hell

- 1) Scripture tells us very little about Jesus' state or the whereabouts of His soul between His death and resurrection, so we are required to assemble a complete picture from fragments hidden throughout the Old and New testaments. We know His body was in the tomb. Where was His soul?
- 2) Scripture calls the abode of the dead, to which the dead Christ went down, "hell" - *Sheol* in Hebrew (used 66 times in the Old Testament) or *Hades* in Greek (used 10 times in the New Testament) - because those who are there are deprived of the vision of God. (Revelation 1:18; Ephesians 4:9; and Psalm 88:11-13)
- 3) Such is the case for all the dead, whether evil – who await Christ the Judge, or righteous – who await the Christ the Redeemer. For example, the righteous Jacob, the patriarch, when he died went to Sheol (Genesis 42:38) as did the righteous Samuel. (1 Samuel 2:6) Yet the Old Testament also said Sheol was the abode of the wicked. (Psalm 31:17)
- 4) According to Holy Scripture, *Sheol* or *Hades* is under the earth (Numbers 16:30–33), and it is like a subterranean city with gates. (Isaiah 38:10) It is a land of thick darkness (Job 10:21-22), a place where "shades," the shadowy souls of men, dwell (Isaiah 14:9; 26:14). It has a wide opened mouth eager to receive the dead. (Isiah 5:14) Attributed to it are both valleys and inescapable depths. (Proverbs 9:18) Sheol is described as a pit, or cistern, where the dead souls are collected awaiting their eternal fate (Ezekiel 31:16) from which the notion of purgatory is derived. It is the land of forgetfulness (Psalm 88:12), where no work is done and no wisdom exists (Ecclesiastes 9:10). Most significantly, Sheol is a place where no one praises God. (Psalm 6:5; 88:10–11; 115:17; & Isaiah 38:18)
- 5) Since the Old Testament clearly teaches that both the righteous and wicked souls go to Sheol or Hades when they die, does it mean that their fates are identical? How is it possible that good men and evil men both go to the same place as they await their eternal fate? Jesus shed important light on this previously hidden mystery through the parable of the poor man Lazarus. (Luke 16:22-26)
 - a) When he died, the poor man Lazarus was received into "Abraham's bosom." (Psalm 89:49; 1 Samuel 28:19; Ezekiel 32:17-32; Luke 16:22-26) Scripture speaks to this and the parable suggests that Abraham's bosom is a place within Sheol or Hades different from where the rich man was sent.
 - b) When the rich man died he was tormented in Hades (Luke 16:22-23) but Lazarus was better off.
 - c) The parable suggests that Abraham's bosom and Hades are two different divisions within Sheol or Hades where dead souls await their eternal fate, a higher and lower region, if you will. Hence we conjecture that both Jacob and Samuel were with Lazarus in Abraham's bosom and not with the rich man who was tormented, though both places of waiting were broadly referred to as Sheol or Hades.
 - d) Jesus explained that there was a wide and un-crossable chasm between these two places – Abraham's bosom (the abode of the righteous) (higher region) and Hades (the abode of the wicked) (lower region) – such that righteous dead were separated from the unrighteous dead.
- 6) It is precisely these holy souls – the righteous dead, who awaited their Savior in the abode of Abraham's bosom, whom Christ the Lord delivered when He descended into hell. They now live in heaven with God.
 - a) Jesus did not descend into hell to deliver the unrighteous damned, nor to destroy the hell of damnation, but to free the just who had gone before Him in time. It was these righteous men and women who died before Christ paid the penalty for their sin and ours, to whom the gospel was preached "even to the dead." (1 Peter 4:6) God is outside of time and beyond its bounds. Jesus' death was to redeem those righteous men and women who went before Him in time, as well as all of us who come afterwards.

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- 7) Jesus' descent into hell brings the Gospel message of salvation to complete fulfilment. This is the last phase of His messianic mission, a phase which is condensed in time but vast in its real significance: the spread of Christ's redemptive work to all men of all times and all places, for all who are saved have been made sharers in Christ's redemption. The righteous dead couldn't enter heaven before Christ's redeeming work.
 - a) Christ went down into the depths of death so that "the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live." (John 5:25; Matthew 12:40; Roman 10:7; Ephesians 4:9)
 - b) Jesus, "the Author of life," by dying, destroyed "him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and delivered all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage." (Hebrews 2:14-15; Acts 3:15)
 - c) Death could not hold the power of God, so in dying and rising to new life again, Jesus destroyed the bonds of death for all righteous men and women of all time. (Acts 2:24)
- 8) Henceforth the risen Christ holds "the keys of Death and Hades," (Revelation 1:18) so that "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth." (Philippians 2:10)

Returning to Peter's Teaching regarding Noah

- 1) Some scholars wrongly attribute what Peter is saying in the passage before us to reference Christ's proclamation to the imprisoned spirits of men who lived during the time in which Noah was constructing the Ark. The word Peter uses for "spirits" is not a word that Scripture uses for the souls of the dead (Hebrews 12:23 being the only exception). Rather, it typically refers to angels.
- 2) Furthermore, if Peter was referring to sinful men, we might ask why would Jesus single out these particular sinners as His audience for preaching in Hades when there were also sinners of other generations? Besides, nothing in Scripture suggests that any of the people in Noah's day repented before dying in the flood.
- 3) We learn from extra-biblical sources that ancient Jewish traditions hold that these "sons of God" mentioned in Genesis 6:2 are rebel angels who corrupted the world of men before the flood. (*non-canonical Jewish texts*: 1 Enoch 6-21, Jubilees 5:1-11).
- 4) Being spirits, they could not be destroyed by God's judgment in the deluge of waters, so the Lord thrust them into the prisons of the underworld to await their final doom. (1 Enoch 14:5 & 18:14)
- 5) In this context, it does not appear that the "spirits in prison" are human souls at all, but fallen angels whose wickedness was closely connected with the flood in Jewish tradition. This squares well with the frequent use of the word "spirits" for angels in the New Testament. (Matthew 12:45; Luke 10:20 and Hebrews 1:14)
- 6) Some connect Peter's words with the Ascension, that idea that Christ proclaimed Himself Victor over evil as He passed by the spirits bound in the lower regions of heaven on His way to the Father. More likely, it would seem to me, Peter is referring Christ's descent into darkness and gloom of Sheol, for that is where disobedient angels are kept in chains awaiting eternal judgment according to other biblical texts that allude to this. (see 2 Peter 2:4 & Jude 6)
- 7) We conclude that in addition to liberating the righteous souls of dead men for entrance into Heaven, Jesus also proclaimed Himself conqueror over evil to the infernal spirits whose power had been shattered by His redeeming death. There is nothing in Scripture to suggest that the temporary abode of righteous souls prior to Christ's triumph is still needed today. Jesus told the repentant thief that he would be with Him in Paradise today. (Luke 23:43) What was necessary before Christ's redeeming work is no longer needed, it would seem, much in the same way that circumcision and blood sacrifice, once required, are now moot on account of Jesus Christ. However there is no Scriptural evidence for this beyond Jesus' words to the thief.
- 8) Relating this back to us and our lives, we see that faced with the hardship of persecution on account of our faith, we should look to Jesus. He was victorious over evil, not in spite of His death, but precisely in His death. Peter urges all Christians to take the longer-term view – looking forward to our eternal home and not this life of alien refugee as we endure the hardships of suffering evil and insults on account of our faith in Jesus Christ. In this we may draw strength and courage to be witnesses for Christ and light-bearers in a dark and sinful world, even when enduring hardship and persecution on account of our Christian faith.