

Completed Suffering for Complete Salvation
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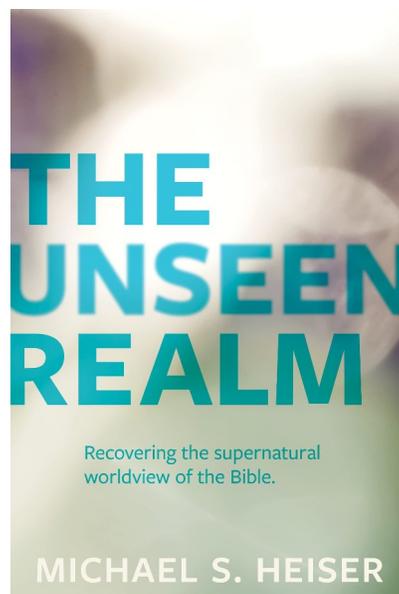
1 Peter 3:17-22

17 For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil.

18 For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, 19 in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, 20 who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. 21 And baptism, which this prefigured, 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, 22 who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

At last we have arrived at the portion of 1 Peter that explains why preachers avoid doing a verse-by-verse series on 1 Peter. None other than founder of the Protestant Reformation Martin Luther himself said this passage: "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."¹ It's also obvious that I haven't done a very good job planning ahead. If I had, I would have figured out a way to make sure Pastor Janet got stuck with it.

If you think I'm kidding about skipping the passage all together, let me share a story from Michael Heiser's book *The Unseen Realm*.



¹ Martin Luther, *Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude*, p. 168.

Heiser is an Old Testament and Hebrew scholar who believes the texts having to do with supernatural phenomena are the ones that are both most likely to be avoided also among the most important. He argues that without knowing how the authors of the Hebrew Bible understood the relationship between the spiritual realm and the physical realm, we can't understand Jesus' teaching or the rest of the New Testament.

Near the beginning of the book, Heiser tells how he and his wife had just moved to Wisconsin so he could begin his doctoral work. They thought they'd found the right church for them. He writes:

The pastor had a degree from a well-known seminary. His first two sermons from 1 Peter were filled with solid exposition. I was excited about the prospects. By our third visit, he had reached 1 Peter 3:14–22 in his sermon series, a very odd passage that's also one of my favorites. What happened next is etched on my memory. The pastor took the pulpit and announced with complete sincerity, "We're going to skip this section of 1 Peter since it's just too strange." We didn't visit again.

Heiser, Michael S.. *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (p. 20). Lexham Press. Kindle Edition.

It's true: There is some crazy confusing stuff here. But we won't dodge it. And part of the reason I wanted to share that story is because Dr. Heiser is going to be a huge help to us and our study.

But even if we didn't have access to top-notch scholarship (thanks be to God that we do), we can still catch the essence of Peter's thought and feel Peter's passion and excitement. Even if we gloss over the confusing bits (we won't), the first and last verses ring with gospel clarity:

Christ suffered, once and for all, in order to bring us to God.

The resurrected Christ has been victorious, so that he now stands at God's right hand with authority over all things.

We who have been baptized into this mystery can rest easy. We have passed through the waters into assured salvation.

Last week we looked at 3:13-17, but I included verse 17 again in our reading for this morning so that we can follow Peter's train of thought. He is trying to explain why it is better to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. Jesus Christ suffered for doing good, and that suffering accomplished our salvation. **The suffering of Christ was complete, the victory of Christ is complete, and our salvation is therefore complete.** Peter wants us to understand that the victory was so complete that it even overcame those being in the spiritual realm who had opposed God's will back in the mists of prehistory.

To make his point, Peter draws upon two sources – one we modern-day Christians know well, and another we hardly know at all.

In Genesis 6:1-4, we learn how things were before Noah's flood:

Gen 6:1-4

When people began to multiply on the face of the ground, and daughters were born to them, 2 the sons of God saw that they were fair; and they took wives for themselves of all that they chose. 3 Then the LORD said, "My spirit shall not abide in mortals forever, for they are flesh; their days shall be one hundred twenty years." 4 The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also afterward—when the sons of God went in to the daughters of humans, who bore children to them. These were the heroes that were of old, warriors of renown.

This text appears to describe how some divine beings described as the "sons of God" intermarried with human women and bore a race of people known as the Nephilim.

This is the first source Peter is thinking about. The second is a text that few Christians today know much about, though Peter and his contemporaries would have been very familiar with it. *First Enoch* goes into detail about how a group of angels referred to as the Watchers became filled with desire for human women and bore a race of giants. The two texts are clearly talking about the same events. Things go from bad to worse very quickly. The giants...

1 Enoch 7:3-5

... [C]onsumed all the acquisitions of men. And when men could no longer sustain them, the giants turned against them and devoured mankind. And they began to sin against birds, and beasts, and reptiles, and fish, and to devour one another's flesh, and drink the blood. Then the earth laid accusation against the lawless ones."

Robert Henry Charles, ed., *Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913), 192.

God sends the angels Michael, Uriel, Raphael, and Gabriel to deal with the situation, special forces style. They bind the Watchers and imprison them.

Full of remorse, the fallen angels ask the righteous prophet Enoch to file a petition on their behalf to God for clemency. Enoch does so, but God refuses to grant it. Enoch must then travel down into the earth—to the part of the underworld where the angels are imprisoned—and break the news to them.

The corruption that the fallen angels have wrought upon the earth is so bad that the Most High decides to send the flood. The flood cleanses the earth while Noah, his family, and their floating zoo pass through the waters and are saved.

These are the stories Peter has in mind as he reflects on the complete victory Jesus Christ has achieved over sin and evil – a victory that is extended to all who put their trust in him.

Now that we have this context, we can start to make more sense of this text. Peter is employing a typology to explain Christ's spiritual work and our right response to it. He is just doing it in a

form of shorthand that is hard for us moderns to follow. Another example of typology in the New Testament is easier for us to track. In Romans 5, Paul portrays Jesus as the “new Adam.” Just as sin and death come into the world through one person (Adam), so grace and life come through one person (Jesus Christ).

Peter is comparing Enoch and Jesus in a similar way. As Enoch descended into Tartarus to inform these fallen angels of their punishment, so Jesus also descends to announce that they are *still defeated* -- in spite of his crucifixion. As Heiser explains it,

God’s plan of salvation and kingdom rule had not been derailed—in fact, it was right on schedule. The crucifixion actually meant victory over every demonic force opposed to God. This victory declaration is why 1 Peter 3:14–22 ends with Jesus risen from the dead and set at the right hand of God—above all angels, authorities and powers. The messaging is very deliberate, and has a supernatural view of Genesis 6:1–4 at its core.²

I want to pause here and acknowledge that, if you are at all familiar with this passage then this is almost certainly NOT what you thought it was about. You may have even had someone explain to you that this passage is about Jesus descending into hell and proclaiming the gospel to people who lived and died before Jesus’ earthly ministry. It seems natural to me that we might *want* it to be about that. Why? Because we want to know about the eternal destiny of those who never got a chance to hear the gospel, confess Jesus as Lord, and be baptized. We have this question rolling around in our heads and are tempted to seize upon this passage because it seems to give us an answer. But not just any answer. It gives us one that we like! “See?” we say. “God is a fair guy! God wouldn’t send people to hell unfairly. Everyone got a chance to hear the gospel – even those who lived BC instead of AD!”

This interpretation appears to have started with Clement of Alexandria, and it is even alluded to in some versions of the Apostles Creed (see Edwards). But just because we like a certain interpretation doesn’t make it the right one. It can’t be the right one if it isn’t what Peter meant.

**We must understand what the author meant *then*
if we want to understand what it means for us *now*.**

If we are going to understand scripture rightly, we need to commit ourselves to understanding what the author meant *then*. Otherwise we aren’t going to be able to understand what it means for us *now*.

This is really important if we are going to understand what Peter is saying about baptism in this passage.

Peter extends his use of typology further when he connects the flood waters of Genesis 7 with the baptism waters of the New Testament. As the flood waters were a physical means of cleansing, healing, restoring, and rescuing in Gen 7, so the baptismal waters are for believers.

² Heiser, Michael S.. The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible (pp. 383-384). Lexham Press. Kindle Edition.

I am going to quote Michael Heiser at length here:

So how does this relate to baptism? Our focus for answering that question is two terms in verse 21, that baptism is “an **appeal** to God for a good **conscience** through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” ... The word most often translated “appeal” (eperōtēma) in verse 21 is best understood as “pledge”... Likewise the word “conscience” (suneidēsis) does not refer to the inner voice of right and wrong in this text. Rather, the word refers to the disposition of one’s loyalties, a usage that is also found in other contexts and Greek literature.

Baptism, then, is not what produces salvation. It “saves” in that it reflects a heart decision: a pledge of loyalty to the risen Savior. In effect, baptism in New Testament theology is a loyalty oath, a public avowal of who is on the Lord’s side in the cosmic war between good and evil. But in addition to that, it is also a visceral reminder to the defeated fallen angels. Every baptism is a reiteration of their doom in the wake of the gospel and the kingdom of God. Early Christians understood the typology of this passage and its link back to the fallen angels of Genesis 6. Early baptismal formulas included a renunciation of Satan and his angels for this very reason. Baptism was—and still is—spiritual warfare.

Heiser, Michael S.. *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (pp. 383-384). Lexham Press. Kindle Edition.

Baptism is a form of spiritual warfare.

We should just sit with that for a minute. When we participate in baptism we are engaged in spiritual warfare. When we share in the Lord’s Supper and take that opportunity to remember our baptism, we are engaged in spiritual warfare. Elements that are so common— bread, cup, water, our bodies—are bound up in a cosmic struggle. We look out onto the world and know the struggle is real. But the victory is real too. It is complete. While we cannot do *anything* to save ourselves, we must do *everything* we can to remain loyal to the One who has saved us.

Call

This week, ask the Holy Spirit to remind you of calamities that God has carried you through the way God carried Noah and the inhabitants of the ark. Offer prayers of thanks to Jesus for accepting the suffering and guaranteeing our salvation. **Ask yourself: What does loyalty to Jesus and to his Kingdom look like for me?** How can I take my stand in the world for protecting and preserving instead of rebelling and destroying?

Let us pray.