Chapter 5: Suffering for Righteousness' Sake

1 Peter 3:8–22

The previous passage was perplexing. Why must we be in subjection to every human institution? How do we subject ourselves to every human institution for the Lord's sake (1 Pet. 2:13)? While Peter's main goal run that passage was practical application in various spheres of life (government, work, and marriage), he now takes a step backward to explain the rationale behind our subjection. Ultimately, he grounds our subjection to all human institutions in the Lord Jesus Christ—in his example, his work, and his exaltation that has put all those institutions under his subjection. As we seek to honor Christ among even the most unjust settings, Peter calls us to *seek spiritual blessing through earthly suffering*.

Seeking True Blessing (1 Pet. 3:8–12)

The word "finally" serves to signal a summary of the previous section, where Peter exhorted believers to "be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution" (1 Pet. 2:13). After zooming in to the specific requirements of believers under the authority of the various spheres of the civil government, of master-servant interactions, and the marriage relationship, Peter now zooms out to give general instructions for "all" believers: "have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind" (v. 8). The words for "unity of *mind*" (ὁμόφρονες; *homophrones*) and "a humble mind" (ταπεινόφρονες; *tapeinophrones*) share the same word for *mind*—that is, a *mindset* (e.g., "Have this *mind* [φρονεῖτε; *phroneite*] in you, which was also in Christ Jesus"; Phil 2:5; my translation; for the "humble" in "humble mind," see also, "he *humbled* [ἐταπείνωσεν; *etapeinōsen*] himself…"; Phil. 2:8). Additionally, the word for "sympathy" (συμπαθεῖς; *sumpatheis*) means "fellow suffering" (or, "understanding"), being related to the word for "suffering" (παθεῖν; *pathein;* πάσχω; *paschō*) that will appear three times through this passage (vv. 14, 17, 18).

Still, Peter has not abstracted these virtues away from his general concern to encourage believers who are suffering as exiles in this world. He continues: "Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing" (v. 9). Whereas repaying evil for evil and reviling for reviling feels natural as the outflow of our passions, those passions wage war against our soul (1 Pet. 2:11). Far better, Peter encourages, to bless, so that we might be blessed. Again, this view does not make sense according to the mind of this world. Yet, not only are our passions formed in ignorance of the truth, they also wage war on our souls as we indulge them to repay evil for evil and reviling for reviling.

To underscore this doctrine, Peter quotes Psalm 34:12–16. Previously in 1 Peter 2:3, Peter had alluded to Psalm 34:8: "Oh taste and see that the LORD is good." It is of particular interest that Peter speaks of the one who "desires to love life and see good days" (v. 10), since he has already characterized the days of this world as characterized by the grievousness of various trials (1 Pet. 1:6). As Lenski notes, though, when David and Peter speak of loving life and seeing good days, they "are not thinking of easy, pleasant, sunshiny days but of a life and of days that are full of rich fruit."[1] Or, as Michaels takes this further, to "'love' that life is equivalent to loving the still invisible Christ who will come revealing that store for Christians at that revelation….The

[1] Lenski, "The First Epistle of St. Peter," 144.

language of the psalm is the language of this world, but Peter has made it metaphorical of the world to come."[2] For those who are not mindful of the Lord, the Lord's face is against them who do evil (v. 12b). On the other hand, as Psalm 34 goes on to teach, "Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD delivers him out of them all" (Ps. 34:19). Further: "The LORD redeems the life of his servants; none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned" (Ps. 34:22), a theme that connects back to what Peter wrote in 1 Peter 2:6, as he cited Isaiah 28:16: "whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."

Suffering for Righteousness (1 Pet. 3:13–17)

Peter continues this general line of thinking in v. 13: "Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good?" Viewed from a worldly perspective, this question sounds naive. *Lots* of people are there to harm those who are zealous for what is good! Yet, Peter is looking beyond the temporary nature of our suffering to the eternal reward that we stand to inherit: "But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled" (v. 14). Earlier, Peter said that we can even "rejoice" in the midst of trials (1 Pet. 1:6), in view of the eternal inheritance that is kept in heaven for us. If, then, we suffer for the sake of this same righteousness, then we need have no fear of those who would harm us. Their harm will be short-lived!

Even further, Peter does not suggest holding any antipathy over those whom even the psalms acknowledge to be our "enemies." Instead, he calls us to think about how we might bear witness to Christ to those who would harm us: "…but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect…" (v. 15). In this, Peter offers wisdom that should guide our evangelism. While like the sower we have some duty to scatter the seed of the gospel of Jesus Christ indiscriminately (Matt. 13:3–8), we also have a warning not to cast our pearls before "pigs" who may "trample" those pearls "underfoot and turn to attack you" (Matt. 7:6). Peter balances these principles by calling us to be ever ready to give a defense to anyone who asks, and to do so with gentleness and respect.[3]

Peter recognizes, then, that many will still not respond to a defense of the hope that is in us. While that gospel is an opportunity of blessing for the hearer, Peter's larger goal is to make sure that believers maintain a good conscience for the sake of the Lord's blessing: "having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil" (vv. 16–17).

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[2] Michaels, *1 Peter*, 180.

[3] "Though this is a new precept, it yet depends on what is gone before, for he requires such constancy in the faithful, as boldly to give a reason for their faith to their adversaries. And this is a part of that sanctification which he had just mentioned; for we then really honor God, when neither fear nor shame hinders us from making a profession of our faith. But Peter does not expressly bid us to assert and proclaim what has been given us by the Lord everywhere, and always and among all indiscriminately, for the Lord gives his people the spirit of discretion, so that they may know when and how far and to whom it is expedient to speak. He bids them only to be ready to give an answer, lest by their sloth and the cowardly fear of the flesh they should expose the doctrine of Christ, by being silent, to the derision of the ungodly. The meaning then is, that we ought to be prompt in avowing our faith, so as to set it forth whenever necessary, lest the unbelieving through our silence should condemn the religion we follow." (Calvin, "Commentaries on the First Epistle of Peter," 108.)

The Life-Giving Spirit (1 Pet. 3:18-22)

When Peter was arguing about the obligations of servants to be subject to their masters—including unjust masters—he appealed to the "example" of Christ who suffered for us (1 Pet. 2:21). Here again, Peter grounds his argument ("for") in the sufferings of Christ: "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…" (v. 18). Part of this sentence is straightforward, regarding Christ's (innocent) suffering for sins, as the righteous one suffering for the unrighteousness, for the sake of bringing us to God. The last phrase, though, has created significant debate. What does it mean that Christ was "put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit"?

Commentators have proposed various ways of explaining Peter's thought here. Some focus on the means of Christ's resurrection. For Lenski, the "spirit" is the *human* spirit that was reunited with Christ's body at his resurrection.[4] For Schreiner, this refers to the *Holy Spirit* who raised Christ from the dead: "Christ was put to death with reference to or in the sphere of his body, but on the other hand he was made alive by the Spirit."[5] Others see this as more closely related to the manner of Christ's (human) existence before and after his resurrection. Michaels argues that there is "growing agreement that the distinction here indicated by 'flesh' and 'Spirit' is not between the material and immaterial parts of Christ's person (i.e., his 'body' and 'soul'), but rather between his earthly existence and his risen state (cf. Rom 1:3–4; 1 Tim 3:16)."[6] Thus, many have seen a connection between Paul's contrast between the perishable, natural "flesh" and the imperishable "spiritual" nature in which Christ was raised (1 Cor. 15:42–49). Again, Michaels explains this idea well:

> The statement that Christ was "made alive in the Spirit," therefore, means simply that he was raised from the dead, not as a spirit, but bodily (as resurrection always is in the NT), and in a sphere in which the Spirit and power of God are displayed without hindrance or human limitation (Cf. 1:21). Death "in the flesh" is conquered and reversed; Jesus Christ is set free to complete a mission of utmost importance for the readers of the epistle.[7]

This way of understanding "put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit" not only connects best with the rest of the New Testament teaching, but also with the broader context of 1 Peter. In this letter, Peter has been articulating a *spiritual* (as opposed to a *natural*) understanding of life, where we do not conform ourselves to worldly passions but willingly give ourselves to suffer for doing what is good in God's sight. The motivation for this is that we will follow in Christ's footsteps: as Christ was resurrected from the dead, we have been born again through that hope of the resurrection to an imperishable, undefiled, and unfading inheritance which is kept in heaven for us (1 Pet. 1:3). It is Christ's own life, death, and resurrection that blazes that trail for us. This interpretation is

[4] "How was Christ vivified? The human spirit which went to heaven returned to the body that was lying in the tomb. Spirit and body, which had been separated in death, were reunited in the vivification. How else than 'by means of spirit' (again qualitative) could Christ have been made alive again after having been put to death?" (Lenski, "The First Epistle of St. Peter," 159.)

[5] Schreiner, "1 Peter," 184.

[6] Michaels, *1 Peter*, 204.

[7] Michaels, *1 Peter*, 205.

important as we move on to the interpret the rest of this section.

Next, Peter says that, in that spiritual, life-giving state, Christ "went and proclaimed 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, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water" (vv. 19–20). There are various ways of understanding this, either as something that happened in the past (i.e., during the days of Noah), as something that happened between Christ's death and resurrection, or as something that happened after Christ's resurrection. The best interpretation was offered by Augustine, who saw this as a reference to what Christ did during the days of Noah: namely, that he went *by his Spirit* to preach *through Noah* to disobedient souls who refused to believe *during* their lifetime.[8]

There is evidence to strengthen this view in the Old Testament, where the LORD (i.e., God the Son, the pre-incarnate Christ) said, "My Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years" (Gen. 6:3). As Christ withdrew his Spirit from a disobedient generation, now Christ has been raised as the life-giving Spirit to restore the Holy Spirit's indwelling presence among his people.[9] Peter, then, is connecting the curse of the withdrawal of the Spirit that preceded the flood with the redemptive work of Christ to restore that Spirit, but he is also connecting the circumstances of Noah's ministry to the circumstances of believers in the modern world. Noah was a "herald of righteousness" (2 Pet. 2:5) who did not repay evil for evil, or reviling for reviling, but blessed those of his generation, in order that he might receive a blessing.[10] Further, as Calvin summarizes, "The sum of what is said is this, that the world has always been full of unbelievers, but that the godly ought not to be terrified by their vast number; for though Noah was surrounded on every side by the ungodly, and had very few as his friends, he was not yet drawn aside from the right course of his faith."[11]

Peter takes this logic one further step as he ties the whole scene of Noah to baptism: "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, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him" (vv. 21–22). As Calvin has noted, this passage is so important for shaping our doctrine of baptism, in a way that avoids a merely memorial interpretation (since "baptism...now saves you") but also avoids a view where baptism's waters automatically do their work (*ex opere operato*, since the waters that remove dirt from the body do not sanctify us, but God cleanses the conscience *in baptism*, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ). Calvin writes:

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[8] This is Augustine's view as adjusted by Clowney: "The strong case for regarding the *imprisoned spirits* as the spirits of those who were disobedient to the preaching of Noah can settle the question as to what was preached. On this assumption, what was preached is identified in 2 Peter 2:5, where the same word-stem is used in the phrase 'Noah, a preacher of righteousness'. It is the proclamation of God's righteousness, and therefore of the need for repentance. That message was addressed through Noah to those disobedient sinners during their lifetime. The passage describes no second chance for repentance after death. Even less does it promise universal salvation." (Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter*, 130–31.)

[9] George Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 17–19.

[10] See Clowney (above), *The Message of 1 Peter*, 130–31, on Noah's preaching.

[11] Calvin, "The First Epistle of Peter," 116.

> What then ought we to do? Not to separate what has been joined together by the Lord. We ought to acknowledge in baptism a spiritual washing, we ought to embrace therein the testimony of the remission of sin and the pledge of our renovation, and yet so as to leave to Christ his own honor, and also to the Holy Spirit; so that no part of our salvation should be transferred to the sign. Doubtless when Peter, having mentioned baptism, immediately made this exception, that it is not the putting off of the filth of the flesh, he sufficiently shewed that baptism to some is only the outward act, and that the outward sign of itself avails nothing.[12]

The indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit that was withdrawn in the days of Noah has been restored through the resurrected Christ, who was raised as a life-giving spirit, with all worldly powers in subjection to him. Therefore, as we follow him in his resurrection, we can endure the same suffering as he did, as we also await the same resurrection hope that he holds out to us.

Discussion Questions

1. What does "finally" connect with (v. 8a)? What virtues does Peter commend to us in v. 8b? Why do you think that he selects these specific virtues? How do these virtues contrast with repaying evil for evil or reviling for reviling (v. 9a)? On what basis might we bless (v. 9b)? Read Psalm 34. How does Psalm 34 in its entirety (and in the specific portion that Peter quotes in vv. 10–12) strengthen the argument that Peter is making throughout this section?

2. Since believers are routinely persecuted, how should we interpret Peter's encouragement in v. 13? In God's economy, how are we blessed by suffering for righteousness' sake (v. 14)? What kind of blessing is there in maintaining a good conscience before the Lord (vv. 15–16a)? In what ways will those who slander our good behavior be put to shame (v. 16b)? How does the reality that everyone will suffer encourage us to endure temporary suffering (v. 17)?

3. What do you think it means that Christ was "put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit" (v. 18)? How does this language connect with Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 15:45? What do you think Peter means about how Christ went in the spirit (Spirit?) to preach to spirits in prison as God's patience waited in the days of Noah (v. 19–20)? In what way does baptism correspond to all of this (v. 21)?

4. How does the subjection of all earthly and heavenly powers to Christ qualify what Peter said about our subjection to every human institution for the Lord's sake (v. 22; cf. 1 Pet. 2:13)? How does Christ's power protect us against all unchecked evil? How does Christ's grace transform even the most unjust suffering we experience into something that he will use to build us up in him? For what in your life does this help you gain perspective?

[12] Calvin, "The First Epistle of Peter," 118–19.