

# The Pattern of Christ's Suffering and Exaltation

## 1 Peter 3:18-22

This is a wonderfully encouraging yet difficult-to-interpret passage. (Kimberly at 10am on Monday: "Have you sent me your sermon yet?" It's the hardest passage in the NT. Give me a few hours please!")

Martin Luther said of this text: [It] is as strange a text and as dark a saying as any in the New Testament, so that I am not yet sure what Peter intended." I always admire Luther's candor. We're like, "Wathchu talkin, about Willis!

I mean we get grasp verse 18 like a pillow, a wonderful verse about the gospel, but then it gets tricky quickly! (V 19-20, Unsolved Mysteries)

So we approach some aspects of this text with heremenuetical humility and relational charity. Good people who love Jesus, the Bible, know the languages, (have exegeted 1 Enoch!) disagree about aspects of this text.

With that said, I believe **the primary point is clear**; and **the most important aspects of the text are clear**. It is a most encouraging, Christ-exalting text.

What's the point?

**Suffering was the path to exaltation for Christ, and suffering is also the prelude to glory for believers.**

- He has set the pattern; he is victorious.
- We are safe and secure in Christ.

**We don't have to fear suffering, death, the powers of darkness, or final judgment because Christ has triumphed!**

Christ's victory reminds believers that the sufferings of the present time are temporary, and that victory is sure because Christ rules and reigns over all.

Remember the context: suffering of Christians (**see 3:13-14**).

- Peter writes to encourage Christians that Christ also traveled the path of suffering; and that was also the path to exaltation.
- Therefore, they need **not fear** or **nor despair** because Christ has triumphed.
- **Like the rest of the letter, this paragraph should fill us with hope!**

**Our suffering may not entail everything these saints experienced, but opposition like ridicule or mockery or being excluded from certain things is something that we will encounter – if we're living an obedient life.**

- **If we don't have some measure of opposition then we may be living too much like the world! (Next week)**
- **We don't go looking for suffering, but we do go out doing good, pursuing a godly life in Christ Jesus, and that will bring opposition.**

He adds that we are like **Noah**, an embattled minority who will be saved from judgment, and the sign of assurance of that salvation is our *baptism* (assuming it was done with the right heart).

So let's remember that: the pattern of suffering and exaltation. We need not fear.

To navigate our ways through these waters, I want to give you four headings:

(1) The Atonement of Christ, (2) The Announcement of Victory, (3) The Analogy of Salvation, (4) The Ascension of Christ.

### #1: The Atonement of Christ (3:18)

Verse 18 is about the **death** of Christ ("suffered").

#### A. His death was brutal ("suffered")

- Here Peter is tying the believer's situation with Christ who suffered.
- You're suffering? He suffered and was perfect.
- **You're not alone; you're not strange. He too suffered for doing good.**
- You **share in his suffering now; you will share in his glory later.**
- Our Christ knows suffering not just because he knows all things, but because he himself suffered.
- He's the Suffering Servant (2:21ff) and he is the slain lamb (1:19), now seated on the throne.

#### His death was unjust ("also" "righteous")

- While there was a divine plan being worked out through the hands of lawless men (Acts 2), Jesus died **unjustly**.
- Notice the word "**also**"
- While the primary aim of his death was to **overcoming our alienation brought about by sin** ("to bring us to God"), and propitiate God's wrath, **Christ's example** of suffering is also important to remember.
- Those in Turkey were suffering unjustly, and **Peter highlights Jesus' example to encourage them to bear up under oppression faithfully** (cf. 2:21ff)
- We don't suffer exactly like him, but his suffering inspires us to persevere.

#### B. His death was unique ("once for all")

- Peter puts Christ's sacrifice in contrast to OT sacrifices which had to be repeated **daily**.
- His death was **perfect**; it was the **final** sacrifice.
- So while Jesus did suffer like suffering Christians, **his suffering was nevertheless, unique...**

#### C. His death was substitutionary ("for sins" "righteous for the unrighteous")

- **"For sins."** This formula reflects the OT formula for sin offerings (Lev 5:7; Ps **Isa 53:5**).  
**Isaiah 53:5:** But he was pierced for our transgressions;  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,  
and with his wounds we are healed.

- This is **substitutionary atonement**, the death of one on behalf of the sins of another.
- It's also stated numerous times in the NT giving the meaning of his death (**Rom 8:3**; 1 Cor 15:3; 1 Thess 5:10-; **Heb 5:10:11-14**; 1 Jn 2:2; 4:10)

**Romans 8:3** - "For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh"

**Hebrews 10:11–14**: 11 And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. 12 But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, 13 waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. 14 For by a **single offering** he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

- Jesus Christ died on behalf of sinners

The phrase "**righteous for the unrighteous**" further magnifies this substitutionary work.

- It speaks of the nature of the **sinless Savior** ("righteous").
- This too reflects the OT requirement of an atoning sacrifice being **unblemished** and **spotless**. (**1:19**)
- Jesus Christ was **blameless**.
- The **righteous one** was used as a title for Christ in the early church (**Acts 3:14; 7:52**)

"**Unrighteousness**" speaks of humanity's need for atonement.

- **Only righteous people are going to heaven, but none of us are righteous.... how can we be saved? We need Christ's righteousness accounted to us!**
- **And that the good news! He has traded places with us! By faith we are accounted righteous.**

**Isaiah 53:11**: Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied;  
by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,  
make many to be accounted righteous,  
and he shall bear their iniquities.

**2 Corinthians 5:21** - For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

**Christian:** Rejoice! Christ is your righteousness!

- **You're identity is not in your looks, your failures, your success, or your money or power. You're identity is in Jesus Christ.**
- **He has died on behalf of you, instead of you, in place of you, and through faith in him, we receive his perfect standing before God.**
- **Live in this.**

**Unbeliever:** See what the gospel holds out to you.

Not a message of “do more or try harder, but look to Christ and be saved.

*Cast your deadly “doing” down—*

*Down at Jesus’ feet;*

*Stand in Him, in Him alone,*

*Gloriously complete.*

You need to be “in him.” Let him be your righteousness. Embrace him by faith!

#### **D. His death was purposeful (“that he might bring us to God”)**

- What a beautiful picture here.
- Christ’s death was to “**lead you to God**”
- This is an unusual expression but the OT contains examples of similar language – **leading an animal to sacrifice, leading a person to God for ordination of an office.**
  - Outside the Bible, a parallel includes the “**admission to an audience with a great King**” (BAG)
  - **Philip: “If we fly to Paris, can you take us to Geneva.”**
  - **Jesus Christ takes us to God’s presence! (A Holy Uber Driver!)**
- It’s similar to NT expressions like “**access to God**” (Rom 5:1; Eph 2:18, 3:12) and “**way**” (Heb 4:16; 10:19-22, 25; 12:22).
- But it’s still unique.
- Davids: “Peter is creating a new metaphor, for no one writer has this active picture of Jesus leading the Christian to God. But it fits with Peter’s usual conception of the Christian life as an active close following of Jesus (2:21; 4:13). Jesus died in order that, so to speak, he might reach across the gulf between God and humanity, and taking our hand, lead us across the territory of the enemy into the presence of the Father who called us.”
- Consequently, **you’re safe in his presence.**
- **Jesus made perfect atonement, therefore we have access to God.**
- **We can confidently approach God.**

#### **F. His death didn’t destroy him (“being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit”)**

- I’ll reserve “made alive in the spirit” for the next point, but however we take it (as the time between his death and resurrection [i.e., his body being in the grave and his spirit alive] -- or as a statement about the resurrection), the point is that Christ’s death didn’t destroy him.
- So too for the Christian, death is not the end.
- “To be absent in the body is to be present with the Lord”
- And we too will one day have a resurrection body.

So church, behold your Savior.

- He has taken your place on the cross.
- He has given you his righteousness.
- He has brought you to God.
- He has given us the pattern of suffering and glory.

So you do not have to fear suffering.

Christ has brought you to God; and glory is coming.

## #2: The Announcement of Victory (3:19-20)

Here's where the debate comes in.

I don't want to give you the entire history of interpretation here; or we will never get to the ascension in verse 22!

Let me get at by just sharing what are the three big questions.

1. **Who** are "the spirits in prison?" (19) [this impacts everything in vv. 19-20]
  - unbelievers who have died? (those who never heard, or heard but didn't believe, or unbelievers living in Noah's day)
  - Old Testament believers who have died?
  - fallen angels/evil spirits/powers of darkness?
2. **What** did Christ proclaim? (19)
  - second chance for repentance? (those who never heard/didn't believe?)
  - completion of redemptive work for those who believed prior to his coming, Christ proclaiming liberty to them? [OT believers who waited on Messiah]
  - An announcement of victory, and announcement of final condemnation?
3. **When** did he proclaim?
  - in the days of Noah? [a pre-incarnate preaching, cf., 1 Pet 1:10-11]
  - between his death and resurrection?
  - after his resurrection?

### A. Who?

- I take "spirits in prison" to refer to this place of **where evil spirits/fallen angels lie.**
- In Gen 6:1-4, these spirits, or evil angels had sexual relations with women; consequently, they were imprisoned because of their evil actions.
  - o They had a big impact on the rebellion of humanity; right after this, there is an account of accelerated and widespread wickedness across the earth.
  - o Christ is then proclaiming his victory over such spirits, who have been bound by the Lord, and await their final judgment.
  - o "Christ proclaimed his cosmic victory over the most evil of beings and of the most notorious of sinners in Jewish thought, those in of Genesis 6:1-8." (Green)
- T. Schreiner calls this **the majority view.**
- The **normal** use of "spirits" is of **angels** not human beings.

**Prison** is also very important here and tips the scales in favor of this reading, as it is used is a place of judgment for fallen angels/demons rather than to humans.

- Read [2 Pet 2:4ff](#) see also [Jude 6](#), [Rev 20:7](#); cf., 1 Enoch 6:1-4 – prison language, spirits, Gen 6:1-4 reference:
- The story of these fallen angels was a big deal in Jewish worldview
- Context/Point: **So you don't have the fear them! Evil can't win!**

### B. What?

- Not a second chance of salvation for OT unbelievers. That's inconsistent with all of Scripture.

- Rather, he **proclaimed triumph and announced their condemnation**
  - **“lo, their doom is sure.” “One little word shall fail them.”**
  - They are confined now, awaiting final judgment.
- It was announcement of his Lordship, His triumph, his victor which he won at Calvary.
- This fits with the theme of Peter, of **suffering and vindication.**
  - Christians are suffering, but they too will be vindicated.

### C. When?

- **“Days of Noah”?**
  - There are several problems with this.
  - If you take **“spirits in prison”** to refer to these evil angels who are bound in prison *now*, then it’s not a pre-incarnation preaching event, but something that took place later.
  - It also breaks up the **narrative flow** of the passage (pre-incarnate preaching doesn’t fit the flow)
- We really have two options: **pre or post resurrection.**
  - Some argue he proclaimed victory **after** he rose from the dead before the ascension (T Schreiner).
    - So he was “put to death in the flesh” but raised **into a different sphere of existence “made alive in the spirit.”** (CSB: “by the Spirit” not “in the spirit”)
  - Others argue it was **between** death and resurrection. (so Calvin, Luther, Emerson, P Schreiner)
- I am on the side of between death and resurrection.
- Both (pre/post resurrection views) affirm that Christ announced triumph over the powers of darkness **usually...**
- My reasons:
  1. I think it’s the most natural reading. It’s the plain reading of the text. (Those who don’t have a theology of descent seem to go out of their way to avoid this reading)
  2. It follows the **narrative ordering of events** (crucifixion, dead, resurrection v. 21, and ascension v. 22).
  3. He mentions the **resurrection in verse 21** in verse 22 and could have easily said that.
  4. The verb **“went”** is used in verse 22 (**“has gone”**) as a reality.
    - If he preached “through Noah” **he didn’t really go anywhere!**
    - So when did he go?
      - I prefer the descent during his death, **not having a glorified body and somehow going to communicate with them.**
  5. The phrase “in which” – It can be understood as **“during which time”** since Peter uses the phrase this way four other times in the letter (1:6; 2:12; 3:16; 4:4]. And that time seems best, given the ordering of events, to be in that intermediate time.
  6. I think he uses **“spirit”** to tie **“to spirits in prison”** (also 4:1); intermediate state
  7. The resurrection view is strange, as you consider how did Christ preached to those under the earth? Doesn’t the descent make the most sense?



I take Peter to mean that He proclaimed victory in his descent to the dead.

- o The Apostles' Creed says "he descended to the **grave/dead/ (both the Apostles and Athanasian Creeds)**
- o I would argue that "**hell**" is **not** an option, not the way we think of hell as **the torment of the unrighteous dead.**
- o I **do not** believe that Jesus experienced further torment in hell.
- o The debate about "descending to hell" verses the dead is partly a **translation** issue. **Mike Bird explains that the problem derives from a mistranslation of the Latin *ad inferos* (to the grave, or the place of the dead [the underworld])**
- o It does **not** say *ad infernum* meaning "to hell" (the place of punishment).
  - o Bird adds, "A better English translation of the creed, which is used in the Church of England is "He Descended to the Dead."

The idea is that **Jesus' body was buried but his soul departed to the place of the dead.**  
"Like believers, to be absent in the body is to be present with the Lord."

Matthew Emerson:

"Christ died and experienced death as all humans do: his body was buried, and his human soul went ("descended") to the place of the dead. He descended to the righteous compartment of the dead ("paradise"), but he could communicate with all the dead. In this way, he proclaims victory to those "under the earth" (Phil 2:10).

**So his descent had an exaltation element to it.**

For more, you can watch my Holy Saturday sermon.

Remember the context: suffering, opposition; this is a word of hope.

If you prefer the post resurrection view, main sermon point remains the same:

**Christ announced victory over the powers of darkness! Their doom is sure.  
So you don't have to fear them!**

**Application:**

- Verse 18, you don't have to fear **suffering** because of Christ – he has given us the pattern of suffering to exaltation, and has brought us to God.
- Verses 19-20, you don't have to fear **death and the powers** of darkness because Christ reigns over death and darkness!
- Nothing can separate you from his love – not even death and hostile enemy beings.

**#3: The Analogy of Salvation (3:20-21)**

- Like some preachers, Peter takes bit of a rabbit trail. But it's a holy trail.
- The mention of the flood causes him to add some more encouragement to suffering Christians through the story of Noah.
- Peter's readers are like Christ, **and they are like Noah** – suffering/vindication.
- He says Noah's story "**corresponds**" to our story, it's **analogous** to it.
- **Noah was made fun of (even though he was doing God's will) of but keep pressing on!  
Keep trusting God's promises!**

Two other facts are noted from Noah's story:

- (1) few were saved (20b)
- (2) they were saved 'through water'." (20c-21)

What's the point of this? Again, context. Peter is writing to a minority group of believers. Yet, **you will be kept safe just like Noah's family was kept safe.**

- Now, salvation is not in an ark, **but in Christ.**
- The ark of salvation that saved a few people portrays the salvation available in Christ.
- In him, you will be saved from judgment.
- **"Get in the boat" "Get in Christ."**

**21: Baptism:** This is the tie to water. **There was a bit of water in Noah's day!**

It was a mega immersion! The whole earth was submerged, but Noah and his family came through the judgment to life.

- Baptism is a symbol of death, and life. It's a picture of rescue.
- We are united with Christ in his death and resurrection.
- We have passed through death and passed safely through judgment into everlasting life.

He says baptism **"saves you"** but then he clarifies the statement.

- It's not a magical rite.
- But when one does it rightly, having appealed to God for a clean conscious (the forgiveness of sins), through faith in Jesus Christ, who rose from the dead, then there is assurance that you will not face coming judgment.
- I like **"pledge" (CSB) – "I'm on your team: I'm pledging myself to the winning team, to Jesus Christ who died, descended, and rose from the dead ("resurrection")**

The Noah story was a warning to humanity of eschatological judgment; final judgement. (**Matt 24:37-41**; 2 Pet 3:3-7)

- Saving faith is expressed in baptism – it announces the gospel; your faith in Christ.
- It **sets you apart** like Noah's family was set apart.
- This is made possible through faith in the resurrected Christ.
- **Storms: "By being baptized they are marked out as God's chosen few, who, like Noah and his family, will be saved even when all those around them mock and slander them. Baptism is the symbol of their being united with Christ in his resurrection as well as his defeat of the demonic hosts. Consequently your baptism is the reminder of the victory in which you stand, the victory that Christ achieved by his death and resurrection and exaltation above all principalities and powers."**
- Trust Christ and be baptized.
- Christian, remember your baptism! Let it be a great source of comfort.

Summary:

v. 18: So then, you don't have the fear suffering because of Christ.

V. 19-20: You don't have to fear death and demons because of Christ.



## V. 20-21: You don't have to fear final judgment because of Christ!

Christ reigns!

Finally, he adds that you don't have to fear anything because Christ reigns over all!...

### #4: The Ascension of Christ (3:22)

The resurrected Christ (v. 21) is the ascended Christ (22).

It's the language of Psalm 110 (cf, Acts 2:33; 5:31; Rom 8:34; Col 3:1; Heb 1:3).

Behold the exaltation and ascension of our Risen King.

- He has “gone” (same verb as v. 19) into heaven to the place of authority and power.
- Everything is under him, including “angels, authorities and powers” – which is standard language for fallen demonic hosts (Rom 8:38-39; 1 Cor 15:24-27; Eph 1:21, 3:10, 6:12)
- Their subjection to him was most likely the subject of his proclamation.
- The text goes from death and descent to exaltation!
- Look at Jesus Christ... He was vindicated.
- You are united to him in your baptism, and you too will be vindicated and victorious.
- He is the supreme Lord.
- Therefore, you have nothing to fear.
- You will be brought safely through it all.
- **And we will reign with him!**
- **Suffering now, glory to come!**
- You have every reason to hope.

Recall **3:13**: “Who is there to harm you?”

How much more confidently can we now say: “No one.”

- you don't have the fear suffering because of Christ.
- You don't have to fear death and demons because of Christ.
- You don't have to fear final judgment because of Christ!
- You don't have to fear anything because of Christ.

You have every reason to abound with hope!