

Jesus Christ is the supreme example of righteous suffering. Having looked to Jesus in 2:21-24, Peter again lifts Him up to highlight the positive results of that suffering. Through His suffering Jesus has been victorious.

Some claim that this is among the most difficult of all passages in the New Testament to interpret. In the midst of dealing with interpretive details, we do not want to lose sight of the overall message of this section. I would suggest that there are four facts arising from Peter's development of the victorious, righteous suffering of Jesus.

1. The suffering of Jesus brought victory for us (3:18).

- a. Jesus Christ suffered (unto death) for sins. *Cf.* 1 Cor 15:3. Sin separates from God and requires the penalty of death.
- b. Jesus Christ suffered (unto death) as our substitute. *Cf.* 1 Cor 15:3. He died for our sins. He suffered righteously because he himself had done no wrong. We deserved that suffering but he bore it.
- c. Jesus Christ suffered (unto death) with a purpose in mind, "to bring you to God". His suffering was neither ascetic, nor under compulsion, nor as a powerless example.
- d. Jesus suffered (unto death) but was triumphant. Among various possibilities for the closing of v 18, it seems to me that the best is "having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit" (NASB). The literal term is "flesh", not body. The word "spirit" is itself indeterminate and can mean with "spirit" or "Spirit". Treating the two phrases as parallel, "spirit" is preferred. Jesus was killed in a body of flesh geared for this life, to deliver us from our flesh, i.e., sinful nature. He was made alive with a new type of body, physical in nature but adapted to existence in the spirit world. By his resurrection, we too are made alive, and anticipate similar transformation. *Cf.* Romans 6:10-11.

Jesus does not ask of us more than he himself did. No suffering could be greater nor more righteous than his. He suffered for the sake of those who did nothing to deserve his sacrifice. We suffer for the sake of One who did everything for us.

2. The suffering of Jesus gave victory over the spirit world (3:19-20a).

There are three primary groups of interpretations to this difficult and debated section: (1) Christ preached to Noah's contemporaries in the realm of the dead between the time of his crucifixion and resurrection. (2) The pre-existent Christ preached via Noah to Noah's own sinful generation. (3) Some time after his crucifixion and before being seated in heaven, Christ proclaimed his victory to angels who had rebelled prior to the flood at the time of Noah.

- a. Whereas the first cannot be adequately supported, and the second is possible, the third appears best.
 - 1) The terms used fit better. "Spirits" refer usually to angels or demons, not men. "Prison" would be highly unusual for the abode of the disembodied spirits of men. "Preached" refers to proclaiming something and is not the word for evangelize.
 - 2) Other passages are supportive. It connects with 3:22 where "authorities and powers" had been put into submission. It might connect to 2 Peter 2:4 and Jude 6 which refer to rebellious angels being kept for judgment. It connects well with verse 18. In the realm of spirit, with a resurrection body and because of the victory that represented, Jesus went and proclaimed victory to the spirits in prison.
- b. The time of Noah fits well the general context. There was sin and evil, suffering, and the need for Noah to believe and live righteously. *Cf.* Hebrews 11:7. I do not believe that Genesis 6:1-5 reports on an alleged cohabitation of angels with human women but there might have been high demonic activity at that time.

3. The suffering of Jesus provides salvation as pictured in baptism (3:20b-21).

- a. The majority of interpreters understand that the water of the flood finds a figurative correspondence in baptism. As the waters of the flood lifted up Noah and his family in the ark, saving them from the destruction which the flood caused, so also baptism now saves believers, not through the act of baptism but by reason of the profession being made in baptism. An alternate explanation interprets the verse to say that baptism symbolically saves, i.e., it is a symbol of a spiritual reality.
- b. Baptism is not "the removal (laying aside) of dirt from the flesh". "Flesh" is the literal term, not "body" (NIV). Peter was hardly denying the improbable belief that baptism was a bath, but rather he was denying that baptism lays aside the spiritual filth of our flesh or sinful nature. The spiritual reality is the washing of regeneration (Titus 3:5).
- c. Baptism does have an important function. It is an appeal to God for a good conscience (*cf.* NASB). Baptism expresses repentance, among other things. Having confessed a turning from sin to Christ, the believer anticipates cleansing from God and a conscience which affirms that. It may be that Jews who chose to follow Jesus were especially persecuted when they gave testimony to the deity of Christ in baptism.
- d. Ultimately the means by which we are saved is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The resurrection affirmed the work of the cross and guaranteed our lives.

4. The suffering of Jesus led to his victorious exaltation (v 22)

Jesus Christ ascended into heaven and was given the position of honor and authority at the right hand of God the Father. Suffering had an end for Jesus which included his ascension and glorification.

It is implied that for us as well there will be an end to suffering. Jesus is the pattern for us. When we suffer righteously, we can expect the praise of God when we face him.