

The Victory of Jesus Christ

1 Peter 3:18-22

Introduction: Many evangelicals believe the finest book written in last 100 years on the atoning work of Christ is *The Cross of Christ* by John R. W. Stott. There he writes, “The essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be; God sacrifices himself for man and puts himself where only man deserves to be. Man claims prerogatives that belong to God alone; God accepts penalties that belong to man alone” (*The Cross of Christ*).

These words of Stott find significant support in the Bible, especially in the book of 1 Peter. In three different texts Peter addresses the atonement accomplished by the death of Jesus on the cross. In 1:18-21 he tells us we have been “ransomed with the precious blood of Christ.” In 2:18-25 he tells us “Christ suffered for us as He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree.” Now in 3:18-22 Peter tells us, “Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.” God indeed substituted Himself for man on the cross.

The theme of victory rings throughout these five verses. For those experiencing suffering and trials, these words would provide tremendous encouragement. Christ suffered and we will suffer. And, Christ is victorious and we will be victorious too.

As we prepare to examine these five verses we need to make two important observations. First, the overall message is clear. Through his death and resurrection Christ has saved us and conquered sin and all evil powers. As Schreiner writes, “believers have no need to fear that suffering is the last word, for they share the same destiny as their Lord, whose suffering has secured victory over all hostile powers” (p. 180).

Second, as to the details, this is one of the most difficult passages to interpret in all of the Bible. New Testament scholar Bo Reicke wrote a 275-page book on this text (Ray Summers, *1 Peter*, The Broadman Bible Commentary, vol. 12, p. 163). The great reformer Martin Luther wrote, “A wonderful text is this, and a more obscure passage than any other in the New Testament so that I do not know for certainty just what Peter means” (p. 168). Ray Summer notes, “Once in a more extensive research... this author counted over thirty variations in interpretations of this passage (p. 163). Millard Erickson “calculated 180 different exegetical combinations in theory” (Jobes, 239). We will not endeavor to examine the 30 or 180 different interpretations of 3:18-22! We will, however, follow the wise counsel of the Baptist statesman B.H. Carroll, “The spirits in prison: This is a hard

passage, let us look at it carefully” (*An Interpretation of the English Bible*, vol. 6, p. 215). Five aspects of the victory of the Lord Jesus are readily apparent.

I. His work of reconciliation

3:18

Verses 18-22 flow from verses 13-17. Those who “suffer for doing good” (v. 17) should “draw encouragement from the fact that Christ has suffered and died, and by His death and resurrection has won a stupendous victory over the forces of evil – a victory in which, by virtue of their union with Christ, believers share” (Vaughn & Lea, 89-90). Yes, “Christ also suffered,” but his suffering and death is qualitatively different than ours, for his was redemptive! He suffered “once for our sins, the righteous for the unrighteous,” the sinless for the sinful. As Hebrews 10:12 says, “but this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down on the right hand of God.” Peter will also note the exaltation of Christ in v. 22. Christ died once. His death was a perfect work. It will never be repeated. And, in his death, our Savior effected a reconciliation between God and man. His death “brings us to God” when we repent of our sin and put our faith in Jesus (see 2 Corinthians 5:18-21). The sinless Savior did for us what we could not do for ourselves, that we might be brought to God not as our Judge, but as our Father (1:2-3).

Jesus dies for us “in the flesh” (bodily) and He was raised from the dead, “made alive by the Spirit” (Romans 8:11; see also 1 Timothy 3:16). Schreiner provides an excellent summary: “Even though Jesus suffered death in terms of his body, the Spirit raised (cf. Romans 8:11) him from the dead. Similarly, those who belong to Christ, even though they will face suffering, will ultimately share in Christ’s resurrection” (p. 184). And, those who belong to Christ have the same access to God as Christ! He brings us to the God with whom we have been reconciled (Rom. 5:11).

II. His work of proclamation

3:19-20

Now we enter into the interpretive weeds! Basically, the text tells us that after the resurrection Jesus went and preached to spirits in prison (whoever they are). These spirits were disobedient in the past and somehow all of this has a connection to the time of Noah! (Gen 6-9). We have noted there are dozens of interpretations of these verses, but we will highlight only the five most popular views. We will then quickly explain the one we find most compelling. This is not a place for interpretive dogmatism. Good, godly scholars can be found in support of each of these positions. We will utilize Schreiner’s helpful treatment in our survey (pgs. 184-185) and also that of Vaughn and Lea (pgs. 95-99).

1) The preincarnate Christ preached through Noah to the evil generation of

Noah's day while he built the ark. Augustine (A.D. 354-430) held this view.

- 2) Christ between his death and resurrection descended into hell (*descensus ad inferos*) and proclaimed his victory to those who died during the flood. Some believe he offered this group a second chance to be saved, though there is no biblical support for the second chance view.
- 3) Christ proclaimed his victory to Old Testament saints and the phrase "in prison" is used in a "nonhostile sense" as a reference to "the place they remained awaiting Christ" (Davids, 138). Calvin (1509-64) held this view.
- 4) Christ proclaimed his victory over evil angels who has sexual relations with women (see Gen. 6:1-4; 2 Peter 2:4-5; Jude 6) and therefore were imprisoned forever beginning during the time of Noah.
- 5) Christ preached to sinners of the apostolic age through the apostles and others, people whose sins were similar to the "notorious examples of Noah's day" (noted in Vaught & Lea, 98).

I believe the evidence best supports view #4 above. The "spirits in prison" refers to fallen, evil angels who committed egregious sins in Noah's time by cohabiting with women, which produced the Nephilim (Genesis 6:4). This view has strong support from extra-biblical Jewish writings (Schreimer, 187). It also fits well with 2 Peter 2:4 and Jude 6, and a particular judgment of God against

evil angels. It is also, in my judgment, the most likely view exegetically. After his death and resurrection, Christ proclaimed his victory to the evil angels in Genesis 6 who have been imprisoned ever since because of their heinous sin. They disobey God in an extremely evil manner, in the days of Noah, and were judged appropriately. How evil were the days of Noah? Only eight persons survived by means of the Ark.

The victory of Christ is complete. Demons know it. And, sinners need to know it too while they still have time in this life!

III. His work of salvation

3:21

Verse 21 is one of those verses that is easily misunderstood if you only glance over it and ignore the context. It is similar to Galatians 5:4 which says “you have fallen from grace.” Ignore the context and you can draw the wrong conclusion that we can lose our salvation. It does not teach that. Similarly, 1 Peter 3:21 says “Baptism...now saves you.” Ignore the context and you can draw the theologically false teaching of baptismal regeneration. Again, the text does not teach that. Pay attention to the details of the text and you will see baptism points to our identification with Christ in his bodily resurrection from the dead. Baptist, by analogy (“which corresponds to this”), looks back to the flood and God’s saving of 8 people (v. 20). In that way baptism “now saves

you.” How? Not by literally washing away your sins (“not as a removal of dirt from the body”), but rather “the pledge (or “appeal”) of a good conscience toward God,” all of this made possible “through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

The flood of Noah is a type, “a model or pattern for Christian believers” (Schreiner, 193). The waters of baptism picture our death (see Rom. 6:3-5). Schreiner rightly says, “believers have been saved [by the virtue of our union with Christ] through the waters of baptism” (p. 194). Washing dirt from the body does not save us, but the washing of the soul by Christ’s victory over death and our union with him does. Even Calvin, an advocate of infant baptism, understands the text correctly when he writes: “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 honour, 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.” (118-119).

What then is the purpose of baptism? There are several, but Peter zeroes in on one: “The pledge of a good conscience toward God through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” In baptism, based upon the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, a believer appeals to God to give them a clear conscience concerning the forgiveness of their sins. As Vaughn and Lea write, “A “good” conscience is one cleansed by the blood of Christ and assured of acceptance with God. Baptism then is the believers pledge (or answer) to the work of God in his heart” (101). The resurrection is God’s stamp of approval that the death of Christ takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). Baptism is my answer and pledge of yes to God! My conscience is clear. Boldly I can now come “to the throne of our gracious God” (Heb. 4:16).

IV. His work of ascension

3:22

The resurrection and ascension are intimately connected. There can be no ascension (and exaltation) without the bodily, historical resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Peter tells us the one who was resurrected from the dead (v. 21) “has gone into heaven” (v. 22). Resurrection and ascension is a “double blow” of defeat to the demonic powers of vv. 19-20. The grave could not hold Him. He has risen and ascended back to heaven to His Father.

The ascension of our Lord is recorded only in the two-volume work of Luke (Luke 24:50-53; Acts 1:9-11). It is a particular aspect of our Lord's ministry that is often neglected. However, it is an important aspect of our Lord's work.

Hitting the highlights, what can we say about the significance of our Lord's ascension? (1) It ended the earthly ministry of Christ. It marked the end of the period of self-limitation during the days of his life on earth. (2) It ended the period of his humiliation. His glory was no longer veiled following the ascension (John 17:5; Acts 9:3, 5). (3) It marks the first entrance of resurrected humanity into heaven and the beginning of a new work in heaven (Heb. 4:14-16; 6:20). (4) It made the descent of the Holy Spirit possible (John 16:7). It was necessary for Christ to ascend to heaven in order that he could send the Holy Spirit. (5) It is the necessary corollary of the resurrection. That is, it is the abiding proof that the resurrection of Jesus was more than a temporary resuscitation. (6) It conveyed to the disciples the realization that the appearances, which had occurred at various times over a period of forty days, were at an end. (7) It suggested that Jesus was no longer to be perceived by physical sensation but by spiritual insight. (8) It provided the occasion for the commissioning for witness and the promise of the Spirit (Acts 1:1-8). (9) It provided for our Lord the occasion to bless his church with gifted men (Eph. 4:11). (10) It provided the occasion for the promise that he would come again

(Acts 1:9-11). (Daniel Akin, “The Doctrine of Christ,” in *TFC*, 419-20). There is much significance to our Lord’s ascension.

V. His work of exaltation

3:22

Jesus has ascended (“has gone into heaven”) back to the Father. But, there is more. He is now “at the right hand of God with angels, authorities, and powers subject to him.” Ephesians 4:10 says, “the one who descended is also the one who ascended far above all the heavens, to fill all things.” Philippians 2:9-11 tells us, “For this reason God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow – in heaven and on earth and under the earth – and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” Peter is alluding to the great Messianic Psalm 110, where the Davidic king, now a King-Priest after the order of Melchizedek, sits at the Lord’s right hand. Schreiner instructs us that “Jesus applied the psalm to himself in his teaching (cf. Matt 22:44; 26:62; Mark 12:36; Luke 20:42-43; 22:69), and the influence of the psalm is pervasive in the rest of the New Testament (Acts 2:34-35; Rom. 8:34; 1 Cor. 15:25; Eph. 1:20; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12). The text circles back to v. 19 emphasizing that angels, authorities, and powers are subjected to Jesus. All three words refer to angels (for “authorities” [*exousia*] see 1 Cor. 15:24; Eph. 1:21; 3:10; 6:12; Col. 1:16;

2:15; and for “powers” [*dynamis*] see Rom. 8:38; 1 Cor. 15:24; Eph. 1:21)” (Schreiner, 197).

From resurrection to ascension to exaltation, all these marvelous realities flow from the truth, “For Christ also suffered for sins once for all... that he might bring you to God” (v. 18). His suffering was great but his glory even greater. And, for those who follow His example and walk in His footsteps, our path may be similar. Great suffering? Possibly. Greater glory? Absolutely!

Conclusion: The great reformer Martin Luther (1483-1546) beautifully sums up the victory of our Savior and the victory that is ours because we belong to him. “This he says to enlighten and strengthen our faith. For it was necessary that Christ should ascend to heaven and become Lord over all creatures and wherever there is a power, that he may bring us thither and make us conquerors. This is now said for our consolation, that we may know all powers, whether they be in heaven or on earth, must serve and aid us, even death and the devil, since all must become subservient to and lie at the feet of the Lord Christ.” (Luther, *Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude*, 172).