

Jesus: Past, Present and Future

1 Peter 3:18-22

We've been studying 1 Peter ever since I began preaching here 7 months ago, so let me remind you about the overall perspective on this letter, namely that Peter goes back and forth between the promises of the gospel and the applications of the gospel in our lives. He goes back and forth between doctrine and application, between the gospel and the law. I've said that many times, and we've covered a lot of territory doing that.

This morning we get the chance to step back just a little, and focus on the central theme of the whole book, and the central them of the whole Bible. Namely, the work of Jesus. Peter has just introduced the main subject for this particular letter, the subject of suffering, the idea that suffering as Christians is an ordinary and expected part of the Christian life. He will be focusing on that for most of the rest of the book, and in our text this morning he gives us a refreshing reminder of what our faith is all about. It's all about Jesus.

In many ways, it really is that simple, and yet, so very interestingly, this simple and direct focus on Jesus in our text this morning contains two of the most complicated and often misunderstood verses in the Bible—the reference in verse 19 to Jesus preaching to the spirits in prison, and the reference in verse 21 that baptism now saves us. I find it incredibly ironic that those two difficult verses come right after one of the plainest and simplest descriptions of the saving work of Jesus. So we'll cover those two difficult verses, but the context is so very simple. It's all about Jesus. It's all about Jesus' work, and I have chosen to proclaim that work to you this morning with reference to the past, the present and the future. And we'll begin with,

I. A PAST PERSPECTIVE ON JESUS' WORK.

What did Jesus do?

v.18 “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit.”

So what did Jesus do? In the simplest form, with the most straightforward words,

A. Jesus suffered for sins.

Jesus died for sins, and if I wanted to get really technical, we could discuss two separate Greek texts with different Greek words, one the word for suffered and the other the word for died. That is why the King James and New King James have “suffered” and the NASB and ESV have “died.” The question is whether you believe the oldest Greek texts are the most accurate, or if you believe the vast majority of the later Greek texts are the most accurate. While I would say the older texts, and prefer the translation “Jesus died of for sins,” still the meaning when it comes to us is exactly the same. To say that Jesus suffered for sins is to say exactly the same thing as he died for sins.

More importantly, isn't that the most basic form of a Christian testimony? Even very young children can understand that and articulate that, quite sincerely. Jesus died for my sins. Typically, in families where children are raised well, learning the Bible from infancy, those are the first words of their testimony. Jesus died for my sins.

And we should all be like little children. They should be the first words of the testimony of any Christian. Not whether or not you are reformed. Not whether or not you are a baptist or presbyterian. Not whether or not some particular doctrinal position. But whether or not you believe Jesus died for your sins.

And it is the first word of evangelism also, isn't it? It is the foundation of the gospel that you should speak to those who do not yet believe. Jesus suffered for sins. Jesus died for sins. That's the most important thing that you have to tell to unbelievers.

But what does that mean? Let me explain it rather briefly, but plainly. This explanation has two purposes, one for your encouragement and the other for your understanding as you would share your faith with others.

The explanation begins with the reality that death is the curse for sin, death is the punishment God imposed upon mankind when they sinned. As Paul puts it so well,
Rom. 6:23 "For the wages of sin is death."

Death is the judgment, the penalty which sin earns. Death defines the requirements of God's justice and wrath.

God himself said it so clearly in the Garden of Eden,
Gen. 2:15 "Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it. 16 And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

If you break the covenant which God established with mankind, if you disobey, you will die. And you know the history. Adam and Eve did eat of the fruit of that tree, and they were condemned to die!

I could explain that further with Paul's words,
Rom. 5:12 "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered

the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned."

And you must never forget the inseparable connection between death and judgment. To die is to be judged, to die is to be condemned.

Heb. 9:27 "And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment..."

That's where the gospel begins, the good news begins with the bad news. The bad news is that we "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Earlier in Romans 3,

Rom. 3:10 "As it is written: "There is none righteous, no, not one; 11 There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God. 12 They have all turned aside; They have together become unprofitable; There is none who does good, no, not one."

That's why the Old Covenant required the sacrifice of animals, the sacrifice of blood. To demonstrate this crucial point, that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. Without the penalty of death, there is no forgiveness. That is the standard of God's justice.

But Jesus died for sins! That's the promise of gospel. Jesus died to satisfy the demands of God's justice. Jesus died to pay the penalty which our sins have earned. The word we use for that is atonement, or if you understand the meaning of another word, it is propitiation, meaning the satisfaction of the demands required by justice. Jesus died for sins.

Heb. 9:27 "And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, 28 so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many."

Peter gives us an additional thought, a very helpful one.

B. Jesus suffered once for all.

v.18

Let me go right back to,

Heb. 9:24 “For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us; 25 not that He should offer Himself often, as the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood of another— 26 He then would have had to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now, once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.”

Once, once for all. It was accomplished. In Jesus’ own words upon the cross, “It is finished.” All that had to be accomplished for your sins to be forgiven, all that had to be done in order to satisfy the justice and wrath of God, was done. Once for all. And Peter says it so plainly and concisely,

v.18 “For Christ also suffered once for sins.”

So, this is for your encouragement. Because there is nothing you have to do to earn this forgiveness. There is no good work you perform, no act of penance that you must accomplish. Forgiveness is a gift of God’s grace offered to you, and received by faith alone. Everything that had to be done for your sins to be forgiven, has been done. Jesus suffered, once for all!

Now, let’s look at those difficult verses,

v.19-20

By the Spirit, according to verse 18, Jesus went and preached to the spirits in prison. Prison would refer to hell, a reference to those held under God’s wrath even as they await the final

judgment of eternal condemnation at the end of the age. The reference is to the spirits who are now suffering in hell, having lived and died without faith in Jesus. They are now in prison, and formerly, while they lived on earth, they lived in disobedience. But while they lived on earth, in their unbelieving disobedience, God was patient. God was forbearing. And instead of judging them while they were on earth, they had opportunity to hear the gospel. According to verse 19, Jesus went and preached to them. Not now, now that they have died and are in prison. But formerly, that’s when Jesus preached them, while they lived on earth.

What Peter is really saying is that the gospel was preached during the days of Noah. The gospel of Jesus was proclaimed during the days of Noah. The message of suffering for sin, along with the promise of substitution and reconciliation were all proclaimed by the Holy Spirit of God to the people of the Old Covenant, the people of Noah’s day.

God saved his people during those days. Even in the days of Noah and the universal flood, God saved eight souls. And he did so by the work of Jesus which would later be accomplished and finished once for all. In other word, they looked forward to Jesus.

The point is still that Jesus has put away sin! The work necessary to atone for your sins is finished. It was performed ‘once for all.’ That’s what keeps you from the dangers and ravages of legalism, in which you think you have to add something to what Jesus has done. That’s what protects you from the accusations of Satan, who would cause you to doubt the validity of the forgiveness of your sins, making you feel guilty even after your repentance.

Again, the encouragement of that? What I would call reconciliation.

C. Jesus suffered in order to reconcile us to God.

This substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus had a purpose. There was a goal in mind, reconciliation. “That he might bring us to God.”

As Peter puts it,

v.18 “...the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God.”

The just for the unjust. The righteous for the unrighteous. The sinless son of God condemned in the place of sinful creatures. A substitute, which is the meaning of the word vicarious, if you are familiar with that. So Jesus is the fulfillment of that Old Testament lamb without defect. He was the perfect sacrifice, the only perfect sacrifice ever offered.

Heb. 7:26 “For such a High Priest was fitting for us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens; 27 who does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people's, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. 28 For the law appoints as high priests men who have weakness, but the word of the oath, which came after the law, appoints the Son who has been perfected forever.”

Why is this so important? Why is this so encouraging?
Because this is how you are reconciled with God!

Rom. 5:6 “For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly... 8 But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. 9 Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. 10 For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. 11 And not only that, but we also rejoice in God through our

Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation.”

That’s the gospel! That’s our hope. And that’s our security. “We have now received the reconciliation.”

v.18 “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God.”

That has all happened in the past. That is what Jesus has accomplished for us in the past, once and for all. So let’s move on more quickly to,

II. A PRESENT PERSPECTIVE ON JESUS’ WORK.

Notice one short phrase at the end of verse 18, Jesus was not simply “put to death in the flesh,” as we have studied, but he was “made alive by the Spirit.” In other words, as a present reality,

A. Jesus is alive.

He’s not dead any longer. He is not a martyr, who gave his life for some cause or another. He actually triumphed over death by rising from the dead! He is alive!

We see that reference to his current life also in,
v.21 “...through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

So the work of Jesus on the cross was a triumphant victory over death, because was raised from the dead!

Jesus is alive! And surely, as we live and breathe in this world, even though we are mortal and corruptible creatures subject to death, we have this hope and confidence,

1 Cor. 15:20 “But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21 For

since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. 22 For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive.”

Or, to quote Jesus himself,

John 11:25 “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. 26 And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die.”

So that’s the present perspective on Jesus’ work, that he is alive. He remains alive. And so he promises life to us! But there is more, another benefit of this realization that Jesus is alive, namely that,

B. Jesus cleanses our sin.

In terms of justification, our sins are forgiven. In terms of God’s justice, all the sins of all God’s people were punished when Jesus died upon the cross. “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.”

But God does not merely forgive us our sins, with reference to justification. He also cleanses us of our sins! Here and now.

1 John 1:9 “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Jesus washes us clean, here and now. So it’s not just a judicial declaration, that are declared “not guilty” before the judge, but he actually washes away the stain of our sin, the pollution of that sin.

So, when you come to God, when you come to worship, whenever you begin to pray, I hope that you know and believe that your sins are forgiven by the past, finished work of Jesus Christ. I hope you understand justification and take great comfort

in that certainty and security.

But there is more. I also hope you understand your need for this work of cleansing! We still need that work, don’t we? We still need to be cleansed, that’s why we are still called to confess our sins. Even though we have been justified once for all, when we sin, we stand in need of cleansing! And this should be your prayer!

Ps. 51:1 “According to the multitude of Your tender mercies, Blot out my transgressions. 2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, And cleanse me from my sin.”

David continues,

Ps. 51:7 “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. 8 Make me hear joy and gladness, That the bones You have broken may rejoice. 9 Hide Your face from my sins, And blot out all my iniquities. 10 Create in me a clean heart, O God, And renew a steadfast spirit within me.”

People of God, may that be the deepest desire of your heart, that God would cleanse you of your sin. Not just forgive you so you won’t be condemned, but actually to wash the sin away. And this is God’s promise,

Is. 1:18 “Come now, and let us reason together,” Says the Lord, “Though your sins are like scarlet, They shall be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They shall be as wool.”

God has given us a very helpful and obvious symbol of that cleansing. Water. We all use water to clean ourselves, and God uses the symbol of water to represent the cleansing of your heart. The symbol is baptism, and we administered that sacrament just this a few minutes ago.

The water isn’t magic. There is no supernatural power in the

water. There is no spiritual power in the water. It is not holy water. Instead, the water I used this morning came out of the faucet, and was provided by the city of Mt. Airy through the pipes that run into our building. It's just ordinary water.

But it is a symbol, isn't it? A very helpful symbol, a sign and a seal of the work of God to cleanse us of our sin.

I wear another symbol on my finger, as do many of you. A symbol of my marriage. This ring was given to me nearly 30 years ago, with promises made to me by my wife on our wedding day. We used the ring to represent our marriage. We used it in the very ceremony itself. But the symbol itself has no power. If I take off the ring, I don't cease to be married. But as long as I wear it, it gives testimony to the fact that God joined Sharon and I together as husband and wife. It is my wedding ring, a sign and seal of that covenant.

In that way, baptism is our sign of cleansing. The outward sign of water represents the inward work of God's cleansing power in our hearts. And Peter speaks so forcefully, he has to explain himself. He says, "Baptism saves us." But quickly adds,

v.21 "There is also an antitype which now saves us—baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ."

Water itself doesn't do anything. Water doesn't cleanse the heart from sin, it can only clean the skin on your body. But the Holy Spirit does clean the heart, and that work is represented by the water of baptism. Just as that saving work of God was represented in the Old Testament by the water of the flood.

Interesting, isn't it, that Peter's reference to the flood here is not to the judgment that flood inflicted upon the whole world, but

rather upon the work of God's grace to rescue and redeem Noah and his family.

So going back to verse 20, referring to those who would die in their unbelief, Peter writes,

v.20 "who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water. 21 There is also an antitype which now saves us—baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ."

God saved Noah, his three sons, and all their wives. They were saved through water. Water that represents the cleansing power of the Holy Spirit, who actually washes away your sin so that your conscience can be clean before God.

That's the present perspective on Jesus' work. You are are dirty because of your sin. And what can wash away your sin. Nothing but the blood of Jesus!

There is a very obvious and important encouragement in that for all of us.

Heb. 10:19 "Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, 20 by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, 21 and having a High Priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful."

So we have a past perspective on Jesus' work, a present

perspective, and then,

III. A FUTURE PERSPECTIVE ON JESUS' WORK.

v.22

Certainly, that has already taken place, so it is a present reality as well, but I want to focus on the hope and promise of the future, knowing that Jesus has already gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God. The reality is that,

A. Jesus sits at the right hand of God.

And that is our hope for the future. Indeed, we live by faith at present, waiting for the day when we shall be with him. But by faith we are already in the presence of God, by faith we are already seated with Christ in the heavenly realms. But in the future, that faith shall become sight!

And so we live out our lives on earth with that anticipation of the permanence of our heavenly presence.

1 John 3:2 "Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. 3 And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure."

Jesus' work is still future. In the future, at the end of the age, "we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is."

And, in the anticipation of that glorious day of future and final glory,

B. Jesus is in the position of ultimate authority.

v.22 "[Jesus] has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him."

So the reign of Jesus at the right hand of God the Father even now is the sure and certain promise of his return in power and glory at the end of the age. And so the Father has said to the son,

Psalm 110:1 "Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool."

And we know that the last enemy to be destroyed is death!

So how do I end this sermon? We have covered a lot of ground. Let me identify two specific applications. First, confess your sins to God. If you have never done so, then you remain under the condemnation of his wrath, and I urge to confess your sins to Jesus and believe the promise of the gospel, that you might be saved.

If you are already a Christian, if you already understand and believe God's promise of justification through faith in Jesus, then you, too, confess your sins and plead for God to cleanse you of your unrighteousness, that you might be clean. Pray with David, "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow." With the godly sorrow of repentance, pray that God will wash away your sin.

And then, as a second application, let all of these reminders about the work of Jesus become the ground and foundation of your worship. Let the song of Revelation be your song as you worship Jesus this morning, for this is our song.

Rev. 5:12 "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain To receive power and riches and wisdom, And strength and honor and glory and blessing! 13 ... "Blessing and honor and glory and power Be to Him who sits on the throne, And to the Lamb, forever and ever!"