

EXILES

LIVING IN HOPE
1 & 2 PETER

SERMON TITLE: Christ, Our Living Hope
SCRIPTURE: 1 Peter 3:17-22

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Identity is an ever-present buzzword. This should especially be true for Christians. We are chosen, loved, forgiven, and secure in Jesus. But Peter reminds us of another part of our Christian identity—we are exiles. The "world as it is" isn't our home. We are pilgrims on a journey, telling others along the way about the wonderful things God has done in calling us out of darkness and into his light. And just like Peter's personality, these two letters that share his name are bold invitations to cling to a living hope in the face of any suffering that may come our way.

We continue to draw parallels between the situation we as Christ-followers find ourselves in today and the early Christians to whom the apostle Peter wrote in the mid-first century. Then, as today, practicing Christians were slandered and scorned for their beliefs and morality. It is easy to feel hopeless when everything seems stacked against you. The temptation is to just "blend in and go with the flow" of the dominant culture in order to avoid conflict. But Peter tells us that if you take your faith seriously, conflict is inevitable. He tells us that when we do good and bless those who make life hard for us, we may suffer for it (3:17). And that may lead to more hopelessness. So, the question is—Where do we anchor our hope? How can we "make a case for hope that is in us" (15) when things seem hopeless? And those questions merge into the larger question we are trying to answer in this study through 1 Peter and that is—What does it look like to be a faithful follower of Jesus in a world that is growing more and more hostile to our faith?

First Peter 3:17-22 is one of the most difficult passages in all the Bible to understand. The great Protestant reformer Martin Luther said: "This is a strange text and certainly a more obscure passage than any other in the New Testament. I still do not know for sure what the apostle meant." There are at least five different interpretations of these verses and scholars dissect every single word and phrase and pars them out in terms of Greek grammar and syntax.

To interpret this passage, you have to start with understanding the main idea Peter introduces in 3:17—"It is better to suffer for doing good, if that be God's will, than for doing evil." Then Peter ties our suffering to Christ's suffering (3:18)—*and he's saying*—Christ suffering led to glory—to his *victory* over evil and all the angels and authorities and powers in the spiritual realm (22). *The application point being: Don't lose hope. The suffering you are going through is not the final word.* So, the main idea is found in what Peter tells us about Jesus in 3:18 and 3:22. These "bookends" are a wonderful summary of the Gospel—Jesus suffered and died for our sins (3:18), he rose from the dead and went into heaven where he is now seated at the right hand of God with all angels, authorities, and powers having been made subject to him (3:22). No matter how bad things get, nothing can come against you that is beyond the control of the risen and exalted Christ. Your hope is in the risen and exalted Christ, *and that means*, if you do suffer for your faith, suffering is not the final word.

Enough said—not quite. For some reason, in 3:19-20 Peter decides to illustrate this great Gospel truth about Christ's suffering leading to his glorious victory over all evil powers by using a bizarre illustration about how, between his death and ascension, Jesus went somewhere to preach to some spirits in prison. And that raises all kinds of questions like: Where did Jesus go? Who were these spirits in prison? What did he preach to them? And then, how does all this tie to Noah, the flood, the ark, and baptism "saving" us? Kinda makes your head spin doesn't it?

There's no way I can put all that I say in this message into a two-page sermon summary. The verses that I will highlight to underscore how I've come to understand this text are: Genesis 5:21-24; (cf Hebrews 11:5) Genesis 6:1-11; 2 Peter 2:4-5, 9; Jude 6, 14. In addition to this, you also have to know something about how these verses relate to the story contained the ancient book of 1 Enoch. The book of Enoch was never considered by the church to be a part of the Bible, but it was well-known as a book of Jewish folklore. But obviously if both Peter and Jude refer back to it, then some parts of it may in fact be truthful, albeit, not on a par with inspired Scripture. It's definitely not a story you've heard in Sunday School.

Again, there are too many details and not enough room in these Sermon Notes to cover all I say, but with help of Bible scholar Karen Jobes, I will summarize the flow of thought through this passage (3:17-22). This passage explains that it is better to suffer for doing good than for doing evil (3:17) because Christ, by the power of his resurrection and ascension, has defeated all the powers of evil and will destroy them along with all who practice evil (just as in the days of Noah). So, suffering unjustly for doing good is evidence that Christians are on the right side of history. Suffering for doing good is a part of living out the pledge—the loyalty oath—made to God in believer’s baptism—that is, the pledge to “follow Christ all the days of your life.” Living out this pledge in the power of the Spirit, rescues us from the temptation to be pulled into the corrupting passions of the world (4:1). Just as Christ’s suffering and death led to his glorious victory over all the powers of evil, so also, our suffering is not the final word.

And here’s why Peter may have illustrated all this with Noah (thanks again to Karen Jobes). Noah and his family were a minority surrounded by hostile unbelievers, so are Peter’s readers (3:13–14; 4:4, 12–13). Noah was righteous in the midst of a wicked world. Peter exhorts his readers to be righteous in the midst of wicked unbelievers (3:13–14, 16–17; 4:3–4). Noah witnessed boldly to those around him by believing God and building the ark. Peter encourages his readers to be good witnesses to unbelievers around them (3:14, 16–17). Noah realized that judgment was soon to come upon the world. Peter reminds his readers that God’s judgment is certainly coming, perhaps soon (4:5,7). At the time of Noah, God patiently waited for repentance from unbelievers before he brought judgment. So it is in the situation of Peter’s readers. Noah was finally saved with only a few others. Peter encourages his readers that, though their numbers are small—they too will *certainly* and *finally* be saved—because all the powers of evil in earth and in heaven have been subjected to the risen and exalted Christ (3:22; 4:13, 19; 5:10).

Peter says, Arm yourself with this way of thinking... (4:1) The heavenly reality of Christ’s victory over all evil powers overcomes the hopelessness of earthly disappointments. So, no matter how bad things get, nothing can come against you that is beyond the control of the risen and exalted Christ. No matter how hostile the world might become, do not lose hope. Remember, unjust suffering is not the final word.

Anchor your identity in the risen and exalted Christ—He alone is our living hope—He alone has the final word.

Discussion Starters

Have someone read 1 Peter 3:17-22

1. Carrying a bit of last week forward, have you had any opportunities to “do good and bless” anyone who is making life hard for you? Any situations where you missed an opportunity to do good to a difficult person?
2. How does 3:17 lead into what Peter says in 3:18? What’s the connection between vv.17 and 18?
3. What is the “big idea” Peter is emphasizing in this passage (look at 3:18 and 22)?
4. What is the truth in these “bookends” that give us a living hope?
5. How does the illustration in vv. 19-20 help make the the truth in the bookends more powerful?
6. How does this entire passage taken together, help you overcome the feeling of hopelessness as you see our society becoming more and more hostile to our faith?
7. What does this passage teach us about living as a faithful follower of Jesus in an antagonistic world?