

First Sunday in Lent – Epistle

SUFFERING TO DEATH OR LIFE

1 Peter 3:18-22

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Analysis by Kris Wright

18For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, 19in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, 20who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah during the building of the ark, in which a few, this is, eight persons, were saved through water. 21And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you – not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, 22who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

DIAGNOSIS: SUFFERING THAT IS DEATH-DEALING

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Seeking to Be Spared*

Humans (especially Christians?) live under the delusion that we should be spared suffering—that all suffering is etymologically bad (evil). “It is better, IF IT IS GOD’S WILL, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil,” says Peter. But we aren’t buying that! There may be a suffering that makes us more fully and truly human, in the image of God, but we reject that for ourselves. We want the gain without the pain. Especially in our

modern age with our technological and medical arsenal, we view any suffering, whether for doing good or evil, whether brought about by sin (ours or another's) or natural disaster, or just suffering inherent in fallen creation, as something to be conquered. We live in denial. What is more, our incapacity to suffer leads to a lack of compassion (the ability to experience the suffering of others with them); we search for an external enemy to blame. We are tempted to retaliate, "repay evil for evil, abuse for abuse." (v. 14)

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – Fearlessly Faithless

Though we live in denial, we cannot escape the reality of suffering. We become anxious. We "fear those who can kill the body" (Luke 12:5) rather than God. Indeed, rather than fearing, loving and trusting God, we, in our search for someone to blame, ultimately accuse God of wishing us ill, of being impotent, unfaithful, not loving us the way we "should be loved." We feel betrayed by God who did not save us from suffering. We reject God's ways, preferring instead the ways of the world, and we become the unrighteous ones (v. 18). We seek another, more comfortable, safer righteousness. We seek to spare ourselves, save ourselves (from God?): "Father, let this cup pass me by. Not your will, but mine be done."

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – Abandoned/Imprisoned/Dead

In accusing him, we find ourselves standing before the very God who now judges us and finds us guilty of unbelief. We are sentenced to join the disobedient of Noah's day (v. 19) in "sinners' prison." Worse yet, our unrighteousness has earned us the death sentence. Our love and trust of self being greater than our love, trust and fear of God, we are alive in the flesh but dead in the spirit. We are left banging on the bars with our empty cup crying out about the injustice of it all.

PROGNOSIS: SUFFERING THAT IS LIFE-GIVING

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *Set Free by Suffering*

God has heard the cries of his faithless people and sends Someone to appeal our case. No less than the Judge's own Son comes to our side and pleads on our behalf. Though innocent he takes our death sentence on himself, "the righteous for the unrighteous" (v. 18). Not only does he take our death sentence, but he gives us his "Life sentence." "He suffered for the sins of all." He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit" (v. 18b). Crucified once for all, and now resurrected, Christ comes to the "sinners' prison" to proclaim freedom for those imprisoned and release to those held captive by unbelief. Crucified, resurrected and now ascended, Christ has "gone into heaven and is at God's right hand." The "Suffering Servant" has become gloriously victorious over all things (v. 22), even our sin, disobedience and suffering.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Free to be Fearfully Faithful*

As in the story of Noah, we are saved through water – this time not just a few people, but all who are baptized into the story of Jesus, into his suffering, death and resurrection. Believing now, we are reconciled to God; we need no longer fear suffering and those who seek to harm us (v. 14). We are free and able to fear, love and trust God who holds all of our life, including our suffering and death in his gracious right hand so that nothing can separate us from his love in Christ Jesus. At last faith is ours! "An appeal to God for a good conscience," i.e., we claim a new awareness of the pledge, the promise that Christ is for us. And if Christ is for us, who can be against us? Even God!

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Free to Suffer for*

Others

In Christ we have known the power of suffering on behalf of God and for his people. In suffering for doing right, we are blessed. (v. 14) We know that far from being spared this kind of vicarious suffering, as Christians we are called to it. We can then embrace this suffering knowing that, in Christ we are saved not from but through it. This is not masochism or fatalism. This is compassion, experiencing the suffering of others with and for them. And we are always “prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks to give the reason for the hope we have.” If even the “spirits of Noah’s day who are in prison” are an object of God’s love, if even the unrighteous can be saved by hearing, then surely we are sent to the captives of our day to be a blessing and to proclaim the good news that Christ has set them free.