

The Righteous for the Unrighteous

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[0 : 00] I want you to open up your copy of the Scriptures to 1 Peter chapter 3. As we finish chapter 3 this morning, we're going to see, well, begin to finish chapter 3.

We will spend actually at least two weeks on this paragraph here in 1 Peter chapter 3. But we're going to begin reading in verse 18 and move all the way down to verse 22.

So I want to ask you guys to stand with me as we read God's Word together. The Apostle Peter writes, For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the Spirit, in which He went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is eight persons, were brought safely through water.

Baptism, which corresponds to this, 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, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to Him.

Help us now to see and understand Your Word, we pray in Christ's name. Amen. Amen. You all have probably heard the phrase, or heard someone say to you, don't miss the forest for the trees.

[1 : 28] And the point of that statement is to say, don't get so caught up in the details of something that you miss the big picture. Don't spend all of your time examining a tree or a couple of trees and forget that you're in the midst of a vast, beautiful forest.

And sometimes when we come to certain passages of Scripture, we are tempted to get bogged down in the tricky parts of a particular passage of Scripture, and we spend all of our time trying to figure out, trying to work out exactly what this phrase or this sentence or this verse means, and we miss the broader picture, we miss the broader context in which that occurs.

And this is one of those passages in which we could very easily do that. And so what I want us to do this morning is I want us to take a look at these verses and try to see the big picture, try to see the forest that Peter is painting for us.

And then next week, and maybe even the week after that, we will spend some time examining the individual trees, the difficulties in this passage. Because there are difficulties in this passage.

In fact, I came across a number of preachers and commentators and interpreters of the Bible who argued that this is the single most difficult paragraph to understand in the entire New Testament.

[2 : 53] Now, I don't know if that's true. There are several passages that are kind of difficult to understand in the New Testament. But this has to rank pretty high. There are some difficult things that Peter says that we have to piece together and try to figure out in this paragraph.

But I don't want us to worry about those things this morning. We will get to those next week. This morning, I want us to see the big picture. And the big picture of this paragraph, let me just give you a summary of what this paragraph is mainly about.

Don't get caught up in what the spirits are, who the spirits are, what it means to go and preach to them. Don't get caught up in the language about baptism. We'll get to all that. The big picture here is Peter is saying that Christ, by His suffering and death and resurrection, has redeemed us, has rescued us from the penalty of our sins, and simultaneously has defeated the cosmic powers of darkness that rule in this fallen world.

So let me say that again for you. Through Christ's suffering and death and resurrection, He has redeemed us and rescued us from the penalty of our own sins, and He has defeated the spiritual forces of darkness at work in this world.

That's the big picture of what Peter is saying in this very complicated paragraph. And so I want to take a look at one of those, one facet of that statement, that Christ, by His death, by His suffering and death, has rescued us, has redeemed us from the penalties of our sin.

[4 : 23] And we can see that very clearly in verse 18, where he says that Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God.

So we're going to look at those three phrases. Christ suffered once for sins, He was the righteous for the unrighteous, and He did that so that He might bring us to God. We're going to look at those three phrases this morning and try to understand exactly what Peter is saying to us.

So we'll start at the end and ask the question, what does it mean for Christ to bring us to God? It means, first of all, that we are not naturally on our own near God.

We are far from Him. In fact, the Bible tells us not only are we far from God apart from His grace and apart from the sacrifice of Christ, but we are actually, we are the enemies of God.

In fact, as sinners, as sinful people, it would be dangerous for us on our own to try to come near to the presence of God. We have to be brought near by Christ, because for us to come into the presence of God apart from His work is deadly for us.

[5 : 36] Do you remember in Exodus chapter 33, when Moses said to God, God, I want to see Your glory. I want to see it on full display, to which God replied to Moses, Moses, who had enjoyed more intimate fellowship with God than anyone else in the Old Testament.

God said, You cannot see My face, for no one shall see Me and live.

You want to live, Moses? If you want to move past this moment, you cannot see the unveiled appearance of My glory. You cannot see it.

And so, so He hides Moses in sort of a cave or a niche in the rocks, and He covers Moses' eyes, and He passes by Moses, and He allows Moses to see just a flickering glimpse of His glory.

That's all Moses can see, because anything more than that will be too much for the prophet to see and live. And even at that, even with that glimpse, we are told that when Moses, when Moses, after spending time with God, later on, on another incident, when Moses had been in God's presence, when He came down from the mountain, He had to veil His face, because the reflected glory of God from Moses' face was too great, was too much for the people to bear.

[7 : 01] You cannot simply come into God's presence and expect to survive that. Do you remember the story of Isaiah? When Isaiah came, when God revealed Himself to Isaiah in the midst of the temple, and Isaiah's response to this revelation of the glory of God was to say, woe is me, which is a way of saying, a curse is upon me.

I am undone. I'm falling apart. I'm dying in the presence of holiness. There's a holiness and a majesty and a glory about God that we cannot, as sinners, endure.

We cannot do it. Because God, in His holiness, cannot and will not tolerate sin in any form.

Now, there's a tendency, we have this tendency to say, well, that's sort of an Old Testament picture of God. That's, you know, that's how they thought of God in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, you know, they picture Him as like a God of wrath and anger and all these sorts of things.

But that's not the New Testament picture of God. No. It's very much a New Testament picture of God. Jesus, in fact, says in Matthew chapter 10 that you are not to fear those that can destroy the body, but you are to fear Him, God, who is able to destroy both body and soul in hell.

[8 : 21] Jesus never loses touch with the Old Testament concept of God as a wrathful, vengeful God who does not tolerate sin. In fact, I want you to hold your place in 1 Peter and turn back just a few pages in your Bible to 2 Thessalonians chapter 1 where we see it's not only Jesus who has a clear vision of God in His wrath and holiness, but the Apostle Paul as well teaches the same thing.

Because in 2 Thessalonians chapter 1, in the middle of verse 7, Paul speaks of a time when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

They, he says, will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His might. This is a fully New Testament idea.

This is a biblical idea that we cannot simply come into the presence of God as a sinful person. To do so is to incur His wrath and His judgment and like Isaiah, we will be undone.

There will be nothing left to stand. In fact, this business of the wrath of God, this business of God as a holy God is I think it is inseparable from the gospel of God.

[9 : 53] I don't think without a proper understanding of God's wrath and God's holiness, I don't think that you, I don't think that you have a gospel apart from that. You may recall one of the greatest gospel statements in all of the New Testament is found in Romans, of course.

Romans chapter 1 where Paul says in verse 16, for I am not ashamed of the gospel. And he says, because it is the power of God unto salvation for the Jew first and also to the Greek because in the gospel, in it, the righteousness of God is revealed.

As it is written, the just shall live by faith, he says. And then we usually stop reading there. We read verses 16 and 17 as a great statement of the power of the gospel and we forget that verse 18 also begins with the word for or because.

And it says, because the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. So that the gospel is the power of God for salvation and in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed precisely because the wrath of God goes out against sinners. So that if you don't have the wrath of God and you don't understand biblically who God is in his holiness, you don't have a gospel.

[11 : 16] So when Peter comes and says that the aim of Christ in his work upon the cross is that he might bring us to God, understand that something monumental is happening there.

This isn't a minor thing. This isn't a minor point that Peter is making. Jesus is doing something that prior to his work on the cross is impossible or apart from his work on the cross is simply impossible. And so you have to ask, how is it that the death of Jesus, how is it that his suffering, which Peter deals with here, how is it exactly that that suffering and that death enable us as sinners to come into the presence of God?

These other two statements help us to understand that, help us to see that. He begins by saying that Christ suffered once for sins. Every word in that phrase is important.

Christ, he suffered. He died an excruciating death on the cross. Not only dealing with physical pain, but enduring the wrath of God upon the cross.

[12 : 32] He suffered for sins, he says. Well, whose sins did he suffer for? Not his own because he did not have any sins. He suffered for our sins upon the cross and he did it, Peter says, once.

He did it once. The phrase for sins is a phrase that's used frequently in the Old Testament to refer to the sacrifices made in the temple. So the sacrifices were frequently made and given in the temple and they were said to be for or because of sins.

Over and over, the sacrificial system included these sacrifices. Festival after festival, sacrifices for sins.

And if you ask why, the answer comes from the Bible because without the shedding of blood, without a sacrifice, there is no remission of sins.

It cannot be. It cannot happen. Why? Why? Why can't God forgive us apart from the shedding of blood?

[13 : 44] Is that an arbitrary rule that God made up? Is it just something that God set in place when He created the world? Or is it something that He set in place when Adam and Eve sinned and said, from now on, I'm making a rule, not for any real reason, but this is simply the way that I want to set things up, that you cannot have your sins forgiven by me unless there's bloodshed.

Is that? Is it just an arbitrary rule that God made up? By no means is it an arbitrary rule. It flows from God's nature. God is in and of Himself.

He is perfectly holy and righteous. He cannot, because of who He is, He cannot bear sin. He cannot just let sin be.

He cannot let sin go. He is a just judge by His very nature. And to let sin go, to let sin be, would be to go against His nature. And He will not and cannot do that.

It's not an arbitrary rule that He made up. He's saying, this is who I am and if you ever want to come before me again, blood must be shed.

[14 : 56] Sin must be punished. It must be. In fact, if you want to turn over to Romans chapter 3, you can see how the Apostle Paul discusses this issue of the necessity of sacrifices made in order for God to be a just God if He's going to forgive us.

Romans chapter 3, you know verse 23 very well, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. And then he says in verse 24, and are justified, that is declared righteous, by His grace, as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ, whom God, mark this down, whom God put forward as a propitiation by His blood.

There's the blood. God put Jesus forward as a propitiation, which means a sacrifice that absorbs and removes the wrath of God.

That's what that word means. It is an atoning sacrifice. God put His own Son forward to receive His own wrath due for our sins.

He set Him forward as an atoning sacrifice, as a propitiation. And here's why. In the middle of verse 25, this was to show God's righteousness.

[16:17] Because in His divine forbearance, He had passed over former sins. It was to show His righteousness at the present time, so that He might be righteous or just, and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Paul says, God sent His Son to the cross because in the past, He had forgiven the sins of His people. He did not immediately rain fire down upon Abraham when Abraham lied and put his wife in danger in Egypt.

He didn't do it. He didn't immediately kill David when David committed adultery. Over and over throughout the Old Testament, we see God letting sin go, forgiving sin, passing over sin.

And Paul says, in order for God to remain righteous, having done all of those things, He had to pour out His wrath due to Abraham and David and Moses and all the other Old Testament believers, someone had to receive the wrath that those men and women deserve.

And what's more, he says, for God to continue to do that in the present time, for God to continue to forgive, for God to continue to justify and declare righteous those who are not righteous, He had to send His Son to bear the penalty to endure the wrath that you and I deserve.

[17:55] Christ suffered once for sins. He was the ultimate, final sacrifice. There's no need of a sacrificial system.

There's no need of a temple in Jerusalem. There's no need of a priesthood any longer because Christ, the high priest, has offered up Himself in our place and for our sins.

And He's able to do that because of what Peter says next. Christ suffered once for sins and He says, the righteous for the unrighteous.

So the righteous on behalf of the unrighteous. Let's be really clear here. You and I are the unrighteous. That's who we are. Alright? It's not talking about just someone else out there.

We're beyond, we're better than this. No, that's us. We're the unrighteous. Paul says, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly. We're the ungodly. That's who we are.

[18:57] Christ died for us. The righteous one, the sinless one, died in the place of the ungodly, of the unrighteous, of the sinner.

It was an exchange. He took our place and bore the wrath of God for us.

Not merely for sin in an abstract sense. He took God's wrath for us. It's intensely, it's intensely personal.

He bore the wrath that you deserve. He bore the wrath that I deserve. And there's a word for that kind of understanding of the work of Christ on the cross.

It's called the substitutionary atonement, that Christ was substituted in our place. And I want you to know that terminology.

[19:57] I want you to hang on to that language because there are a lot of people today in today's world who would deny that kind of understanding of the cross. In fact, there have been a lot of people throughout church history who would want to deny that sort of understanding of the cross.

And the reason they want to deny that understanding of the cross of Christ is because they begin by denying that God is a wrathful God. They begin by precluding the fact that God must avenge himself upon sin and sinners.

They say that's not what God is like. God is love and love never does anything wrong, never hurts anyone. And so therefore, it's unnecessary to think of Christ as bearing the penalty for our sins.

God just simply is loving and he lets it go. Then what do you do with Romans chapter 3? What do you do when Peter says the righteous was substituted for the unrighteous? What do you do with these statements?

Christ was substituted in our place. He bore our sins. The righteous in the place of the unrighteous.

[21:11] And all the benefits of his death, all the benefits of his perfect life of righteousness belong to us by faith in him.

He suffered once for sins, the righteous in the place of the unrighteous, so that he might bring us sinners to God.

To bring us into the very presence of God forever. Now, I know that at this point you think, well, I believe that.

I believe all of that. That's why I'm here. I'm a follower of Christ. Of course I believe that. Of course I trust in Christ as the one who bore my sins. Of course, I believe all of that.

So, what exactly is this passage saying to those who already believe this? Well, Peter wrote this passage to people who already believe these things. He wrote this passage to believers.

[22 : 17] And let's not forget that this verse, verse 18, begins with the word for. For Christ, and then it says, also suffered.

There's a connection to everything that he's been saying beforehand. I want you to take a look up, verse 13. Now, he says, who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed.

Verse 17, it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil. Chapter 4, verse 12, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you.

verse 19, let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful creator while doing good. The assumption that Peter is making in this entire passage and throughout this letter is that we will suffer in this world.

We will. It's not a matter of if you believe God enough or if you follow God faithfully enough, He will guard you and protect you.

[23 : 25] That's not what Peter is assuming here. He assumes, in fact, the exact opposite, that there will be many times that it is directly because of our righteousness, it's directly because of our trust in Christ that suffering is going to come into our lives.

That's going to happen. There is no avoiding it. We are strangers and aliens in this world, Peter tells us. This is not our permanent home and so long as we are sojourning in this place, there will be residents of this world who want to do us harm.

And the residents of this world include not only non-believers, but the devil who prowls around like a roaring lion seeking those whom he might devour.

This is the world we find ourselves in. And we will suffer. And Peter says, take heart when you suffer because Christ also suffered.

And in his suffering, he accomplished the redemption of God's people so that if God has such a grand plan in place for the suffering of his son, and if the suffering of Christ himself serves such a purpose and it is therefore a reason in God's plan, do you not think that your suffering also has a purpose in God's plan?

[24 : 59] Do not be surprised when the fiery trial comes upon you so long as you suffer according to God's will. That is, so long as your suffering comes to you because of your service to God and because he wills it in your life rather than your suffering because you've done something wrong.

So long as you're suffering according to the Lord's will, take heart. There is purpose in that. There is a plan at work here. It's not random. It's not just happening to you.

People aren't, people aren't coming against you for no reason whatsoever. There is, there is a reason for it. Of course, most of the time we don't see or know or understand the reasons.

That's true. Our suffering is not precisely parallel to Christ's suffering. He suffered once for sins.

Righteous for the unrighteous. We, we suffer repeatedly throughout our lives in this world. We don't bear the sins of others when we suffer. We're not substituted in anyone's place when we suffer.

[26 : 09] So it's, it's not precisely parallel. So Jesus understood and knew the exact purpose of his own suffering. He predicted it over and over. He understood.

He knew. He saw why he was suffering. You and I often do not fully understand all the reasons for which we suffer. We don't know. Sometimes, sometimes we get the benefit of after the suffering, a year later or ten years later or twenty years later, we get the benefit of seeing some of the fruit that God brought out of our suffering.

But most of the time, we don't. Most of the time, we don't. But we are assured here by Peter.

We are assured even if you can't see it. Even if you never see in this life all of the fruit that God has brought out of your pain and your heartache.

Even if you never see it, understand, just as Christ's suffering served a purpose in God's plan, so also your suffering serves a purpose in God's plan.

[27 : 14] Never think for a moment, believer, that God has abandoned you to your pain. He has a plan for it even if He never shows you the details of that plan.

So that if you trust in Christ as your substitute, if you believe in Him as the righteous one who has borne in His body on the tree, the penalty for your sins, then know and understand that He is also at work in your life, in the painful moments, in the moments of loss and heartache, and in the moments that are filled with joy and rejoicing.

He is at work in those moments. Christ also suffered like us. and He says, let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.

Let those who suffer entrust their souls to a faithful Creator. He is faithful and worthy of our trust. Christ. Let's pray. This, at least, is not complicated in this passage of Scripture.

[28 : 39] That you, Father, would send your Son to die in our place to bring us, to reconcile us to you. And this much is clear from your Word, that because the sufferings of Christ have meaning, so also our sufferings have meaning and purpose.

I pray, Father, that we would never forget that that is the foundation of all that we do, all that we trust in. That even over the next week or two as we move forward in this passage and we try to examine the bark on the trees and try to break apart all that it means and do our best to rightly understand your Word, that we would not in the midst of that forget this basic Gospel message that the righteous has endured the penalty for the unrighteous.

Let us not forget that. Let us not fail to rejoice in that this week. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.