Because Christ Died, Rose and Reigns
1 Peter 3:18-22

This morning we're looking at a that passage pretty much everyone agrees is one of the most difficult texts to understand in the whole New Testament. Even Martin Luther, the great reformer wrote, 'A wonderful text is this, and a more obscure passage perhaps than any other in the New Testament, so that I do not know for a certainty just what Peter means.' In other words, 'it's great, but I haven't got a clue what Peter's talking about!'

So what chance do we stand? Well, as it turns out, a better one than Luther. Because we have access to resources in our time that Luther didn't in his. Stuff that can help us understand why the people who first heard this read, instead of going, 'wow, that's *so* deep Peter, but I don't know have a clue what you're going on about', would have instead left church having heard it read feeling encouraged and equipped to stay in the fight.

Because they were in a fight. At least, they're in a struggle and they're facing growing opposition for their Christian faith. And after a while, when you're on the receiving end of criticism from family or friends or colleagues, after a while it can get to you, can't it. And you can begin to wonder, 'maybe they're right and I'm wrong', and as it begins to get you down you can begin to think, 'is it really worth it?'

But it's not just opposition that can do that. Life can. Maybe you're trying to live a faithful Christian life, or maybe you're not yet a Christian and you're just trying to live a good, upright life and be a person of integrity, but life's not working, and you're thinking, why do I bother?

And that was the case for these guys. They were suffering for doing good and while doing good. It's why Peter ends the previous section we looked at last week, by saying v17, 'For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.'

But why is it? Why should you embrace the cost of doing what's right and not compromise or not quit?

What if you're not yet a Christian, but you're thinking about it. But the reason you're holding back is that you know that if you become a Christian life might just get harder or more complicated because you're expecting you're going to face a backlash from friends or family.

Or let's say you are a Christian, but you're single and wish you weren't. Why should you be willing to stay single, maybe for the rest of your life, rather than date, or marry that non-Christian who's interested in you?

Or let's say you're caught up in something you know is wrong - could be a relationship or something at work, and your conscience is pricking you. Why should you pull out, even though you know that doing so is going to cause a whole load more problems, maybe even costing you a friendship or promotion or even your job?

Or think about Christian teaching that's unpopular - like the exclusivity of Christ, or the reality of hell, or sexual ethics, and it comes up in conversation at work, and you're dreading someone asking you what you think. Why should you risk the embarrassment or shame of standing up for Christ when it would be easier just to stay quiet?

Because all of those were the kinds of situations they were facing. In other words, why be willing to suffer for doing good? Well, in today's passage, Peter gives them and us three reasons.

Because Christ Died for You
Look at v18, 'For Christ *also* suffered…'

Think for a moment about the people who inspire you and why? Isn't it because you see in them something you want to be true for you. For myself, I think of Campbell McAlpine who taught me the Bible, or Jeremy Blake who taught me how to be a dad and a husband, or Chris Caws who taught me how to live a life of service. And I look at them and think, I want to be like them, I want to follow their example.

At the outbreak of the Second World War, the then Queen, Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother, was asked by the government to consider sending her children - the future Queen and Princess Margaret - out of London and to safety in Canada. To which she replied, "The children will not leave without me. I will not leave without the King. And the King will never leave." Why? Because they understood the power of example. That the courage of others can inspire us.

And Peter's saying, look at the courage of Christ. Look how he embraced the cost. And let the way he endured suffering inspire you.

Except, why did he suffer? Verse 18 again, he suffered 'once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous.' So Jesus didn't just suffer to be a great moral example of how to bear up under suffering. It's that he suffered by stepping into *our* place and bearing *our* sins as *our* substitute.

Well, thanks Peter, but is this really the time for theology on substitutionary atonement? I mean, these guys are suffering.

Sure, but Peter's saying that's the point. Because when you see and understand Christ loves you so much he was willing to suffer for you, it will stir up in you a love for him and a courage to suffer for him.

But it's also about why you're suffering, or why you might think you're suffering and why you might try and avoid suffering.

You see, what does it do to how you view hardship and difficulty and suffering, if you think that God's love for you is dependent on you being a good person, or you standing up for truth? If you do that, but then something bad happens to you, you can start thinking 'God, why are you treating me like this? I've been a good boy. Or I've been Valiant for Truth. Why are you punishing me like this?'

And Peter's saying 'he's not'. Verse 18 again, 'Christ also suffered, *once for sins*.' Jesus has already paid all of your debts, once and for all, fully and finally. So when you're suffering as a Christian you can know, this is not God punishing me. Because of Christ he already loves me, and anything he lets happen to me comes with his loving fatherly purpose. So I don't have to endure this to earn his favour, I can embrace this because I already have his favour.

But also, if how you think of yourself is dependent on how others think of you, what's that going to do to your willingness to pay the cost of becoming, or being, a Christian? Because to feel good

about yourself, you need to know that others feel good about you and think well of you. So you won't risk their good opinion of you. Or, if your worth is tied to your career, you'll struggle to risk it for doing what's right. Or if it's tied to having the latest great experience, you'll struggle to pay the cost of living generously, and giving your money away, because you'll need to hold on to the money to pay for all those experiences that help you keep up with everyone else.

In other words, look for approval or worth in the wrong places and you'll struggle to do the good you should do, because doing good always comes at a cost.

And Peter's saying, but because of Christ you already have *God's* approval - once and for all. And in Christ you are counted righteous. And when you know what he thinks of you, it frees you to risk what others think of you.

You see, Peter says the reason Christ was willing to suffer for you was, v18, 'that he might bring us to God.' Last Saturday night, Su and I were in London, wandering the streets at night in the rain. And we were going down this side street, and then that one, and we had absolutely no idea where we were. Fortunately, we were with someone who did. And Peter's saying, outside of Christ we're like people who are lost, wandering around the city of life with no map, and misreading all the street signs, and miles from home. And then Christ came to bring us home, back to the Father, and to a life lived on a different plane.

Because Christ didn't just die for you, Peter says. You can also embrace suffering…

Because Christ Rose Victorious

Verse 18 again, 'For Christ also suffered once for sins… being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit.' Now, does Peter mean by that that Jesus died physically and was raised spiritually? That if only Peter and the other disciples had only looked harder that first easter Sunday morning, they might actually have found Jesus' still dead body? No.

What he literally says is that Jesus was put to death *in flesh* and made alive *in spirit*. And in the New Testament that word for flesh, *sarx*, is used for the realm of the power of sin and our inability to do anything about sin. And Peter's comparing that to the realm into which Christ was resurrected, that he's opened up to us: the realm of the Spirit. And at the cross, he was put to death in the flesh, by the powers of the flesh, but he was raised by the Spirit, to the realm of the Spirit. And in bringing us to God he opens the door to that resurrection life and beckons us in.

Which means that even if you have to pay the ultimate price for being faithful to Christ, as Peter did, as some of his friends did, as some of our brothers and sisters around the world still do, that death is not the end. Christ has led us into resurrection life, Peter's saying, so don't compromise your faith, or deny him to avoid death, or any lesser cost.

But it's the fact that Peter's talking about Christ's resurrection that tells us who these spirits in prison are. Because who are they? Verse 19-20, 'In which… [In this realm of the Spirit after his resurrection] '…he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formally did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah while the ark was being prepared.'

So, because this is happening *after* his resurrection, this is not Jesus descending into hell between his death and resurrection. And neither is it Jesus preaching through Noah to people trapped in their sins during the time of Noah, which is how some theologians have read this.

Because with only one exception, whenever that word *spirits* is used, it's used to refer to demonic powers, not to humans. As Karen Jobes says in her commentary on this passage, inside and outside the New Testament, *spirits* is used 'overwhelmingly to refer to malevolent supernatural spirits.'

You see, what Martin Luther didn't have access to was the book doing the rounds in Peter's day, or knowledge of the stories that were influential in the culture Peter's friends are living in. And that book was the first book of Enoch. It's a Jewish book describing the exploits of Enoch, Noah's great-grandfather. And though popular in Peter's day, it was lost from around 200AD until it was rediscovered in Ethiopia in the late 1700s - 200 years after Luther.

And in Genesis 5:24, just prior to the Flood narrative, we're told that, 'Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him.' But where did he go? Well, according to First Enoch he went travelling and came across the fallen angels seen as responsible for the growing sin in Noah's day. And as a result of them breaking their God given boundaries, including having sex with women, God had imprisoned them in eternal chains. But they pleaded with Enoch to plead with God on their behalf, to set them free. But Enoch returns with God's answer 'no'. They are doomed them to eternal punishment.

Great, but what's an ancient Hebrew, travelling in the underworld, got to do with these gentile Christians suffering for their loyalty to Christ? I mean, would they even have known these stories about Enoch? Maybe or maybe not. But their Jewish Christian friends almost certainly would have. And besides, we know something else Luther had no access to, and that's that Noah just happened to be a cult hero in that part of Asia minor, even among gentiles. Because they had their own great flood narratives, distinct from the Bible, in which Noah also featured, and in which the ark coming to ground in their back yard. In fact, Noah was famous enough to have the image of him and his wife, in and out side of the ark printed on their coins.

So, can you see what Peter's doing? He's tapping into a story they would have known well. For at least two reasons.

Firstly, in their day, they would have had this sense that things were getting worse, that sin and rebellion against God we're reaching a whole new level - like the growing pressure they were experiencing to engage in the imperial cult and worship of the emperor. And if you look at the state of our own societies you might have a similar feeling, that things are unravelling and going from bad to worse. Well, Peter saying, that's what it was like in Noah's day.

But the problem is that when you're caught up in times like that, you can miss the big picture. And you just see things on a human level - of whose on your side and who isn't. Whereas the Bible draws back the curtain to show us the spiritual powers at work behind the scenes. As Paul writes, 'For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.' (Eph 5:12)

And so Peter's saying, it's not Enoch who proclaimed judgement over those dark powers responsible for the sin in Noah's day, or our own. It's Christ.

And he was put to death in the flesh but he's been raised in the Spirit, and in that realm he has proclaimed *his* victory and *their* defeat. So, when you look out on the world and are tempted to

think darkness is winning, look to Christ's resurrection and don't fear. Don't quit. Because Christ has triumphed.

But there's a second reason he points them to Noah's story: v20: 'Because they formally 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.'

How many Christians are there in your office? Or your class? Or department? You see, it wasn't just that Peter's friends were living in a time when what was wrong was increasingly considered right. It was that, like Noah, they would have felt hopelessly outnumbered. And maybe you know what that feels like. That like Noah and his family, they too were being mocked as an anti-social, on-the-wrong-side-of-history minority.

And Peter's saying, yes, but look at Noah and be encouraged because God's people have always been in the minority. But since when has truth been decided by a popular vote? Or right and wrong decided by majority opinion?

But when you're experiencing the pressure of being a minority you can begin to wonder, 'why doesn't God just end it all, and bring about judgment now?' And maybe his failure to do so makes you doubt. Like a non-Christian friend of mine who recently said to me, 'But come on Martin, it's been 2000 years.' To which Peter would have replied, 'yes, 2000 years of Christ's kindness and patience, giving you time to repent.'

And while you wait, Peter's saying, remember that if God knew how to save Noah, he knows how to save you. Verses 20-21, '… 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.*'

In other words, all along Noah's rescue was pre-figuring our rescue.

Great, but does he really mean we're saved by getting baptised? No. Look how he qualifies what he says, v21, '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*.'

So it's not the water and the physical washing that saves you. It's what it symbolises. That when we're baptised we're acting out our appeal to God to save us in Christ, through his death and through his resurrection.

In other words, we're saved not because we go under the water, but because Christ did. And at the cross the flood of God's wrath for our sin engulfed him. But just as the water that spelt death for the unrighteous in Noah's day spelt rescue for Noah, so the death of Christ means life and rescue for us. And as we go under the water in baptism, we're symbolising our union with him in his death, and when we're brought up and out we're symbolising that we've been raised with him. Raised to the realm of his resurrection life.

So, maybe this week you're going to face barbed comments, or rolled eyes, because you're a Christian. Or maybe you'll read something that tells you, you're a backward minority on the wrong side of history. Why should you stay faithful to Christ and not let that sap your joy? Because Christ died for you. More than that he was raised from the dead and has defeated the powers, and your baptism tells you, you are united with him.

But there's a third and final reason you shouldn't quit or go quiet.

Because Christ Ascended and Reigns
Now, next Saturday, Charles will be crowned King and supreme ruler over all the rebellious Scots, and Australians, and the rightful ruler of all Americans. And as he sits in King Edward's throne, a golden Orb will be placed in his right hand as a symbol of the world. But there's a cross on top of it. A sign of Christ's dominion over the world. And as he's given it, he'll be told: "Receive this orb set under the cross, and remember that the whole world is subject to the Power and Empire of Christ."

And then the Sceptre will be placed in his left hand and he'll be told, "Receive the rod of Equity and Mercy… Punish the wicked, protect and cherish the just, and lead your people in the way wherein they should go."

It's all great symbolism. Symbolism designed to point the monarch and those watching to the king over every king.

Verse 22, '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.'

Why should they be willing to pay the price of loyalty to Christ? Because he died, and rose again, and is now ascended and reigning over every other power. You see, one reason we can wobble when life is hostile or hard, is that it can feel like everything is out of control, and we need to try and maintain control. And Peter's saying, instead, look up and see him who is really in control, and let hope fill your heart.

So, this week, if you find yourself compromising with sin in some way, or resenting some difficulty, consider whether others' opinion of you matters too much, or your understanding of the cross and the Father's unearned and undeserved love for you needs to go deeper.

If you find yourself getting angry at someone you think is opposing or frustrating you, ask yourself 'Have I lost sight of the real battle, that it's not against flesh and blood?'

If you feel fearful, or life feels out of control, set aside some time to meditate on Christ ascending and reigning over all, and know, you are in his safe hands.

And, this week, if you're a Christian and you've not yet been baptised, come and see me.

So, to finish, why should you embrace the cost of following Christ? Because he suffered for you. Because he rose victorious over the powers. Because he reigns, sovereign over all. See that and it'll give you the boldness you need. But it'll also give you a humility to love those who are hostile to you. Because you know the battle's already won, darkness is already defeated, and Christ is already reigning.