

Returning Good for Evil and Suffering for Righteousness

1 Peter 3:8-22

1 Peter 3:8-22: *“Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous;⁹ not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing.¹⁰ For, He who would love life and see good days, Let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips from speaking deceit.*

¹¹ Let him turn away from evil and do good; Let him seek peace and pursue it.¹² For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their prayers; But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”¹³ And who is he who will harm you if you become followers of what is good?¹⁴ But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you are blessed. “And do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled.”¹⁵ But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear;¹⁶ having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed.

¹⁷ For it is better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.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,¹⁹ by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison,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,²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him.”

Background Notes

1 Peter 3:18-21 have been a subject of confusion and debate for centuries. So, for our background notes, let’s look at some of the different interpretations that have been held for these difficult verses. What does this verse mean: Christ “went and preached to the spirits in prison”? And what does this verse mean: baptism - “which now saves us”? Admittedly, it’s not easy to interpret these verses, and various interpretations have been held down through two thousand years of church history.

First of all, it’s important to be aware of the context of these verses. The **overall context** of the passage is **suffering for the sake of righteousness**. In verses 18 through 20, two examples are given of what it means to suffer for righteousness sake. One is the supreme example of our Lord Himself (v18). The other example, Noah, comes in as part of the argument (v20).

The overall argument is that **God the Father rewards willingness to suffer for righteousness**. Jesus Christ was willing to suffer for our sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God. He was raised from the dead (v18) and He is now glorified (v22). For 120 years Noah was willing to be mocked for his moralistic teaching and preaching, but God rewarded his willingness to suffer for the sake of righteousness. Noah and the family members who believed his message were brought safely through the waters of the great Flood (v20).

The overall flow of Peter's argument is that God honors those who suffer for the sake of righteousness. The difficulty in the interpretation comes with the details of these verses.

a. "...He went and preached to the spirits in prison..." (v19).

What does this verse mean? Does this mean that Jesus Christ, in a disembodied state between His death and resurrection, went to hell or Hades, and gave a "second chance" to the spirits of people imprisoned there? Does this verse support the idea of purgatory? Does it mean that Christ went to Hades and proclaimed His victory over sin and death to the spirits of unbelieving people and fallen angels? There are a number of different interpretations for this difficult verse.

I do not favor the view that the Lord went to hell or Hades between His death and resurrection. Remember what the Lord said when He died: *"Father, into Thy hands I commend My Spirit"* (Luke 23:46). I believe the point of this verse is that the Spirit of the Lord preached to people in ancient times, whose spirits are now in prison because they did not believe. (Some translations add the word "now" for clarity.)

Then who are these spirits who are now "in prison"? And when and where and how did the Spirit of Christ preach to them? Verse 20 gives us the answer: these were the spirits of the unbelievers of Noah's day. When Noah preached to them, it was the Spirit of Christ (the Holy Spirit) who preached to them through Noah.

In 1 Peter 1:11, Peter referred to the Spirit of Christ working in and through the Old Testament prophets. And before the great Flood in Genesis 6:3 God said, *"My Spirit shall not always strive with men."* The Spirit of Christ preached through Noah to the people of Noah's day, but they did not believe. Thus they died in the Flood, and their spirits are now in prison.

b. "...Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you..." (v21, ESV).

What does this verse mean? We know it cannot mean that we receive our salvation through baptism, because that would contradict other clear Scriptures. Look at verse 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."* It's the work of Christ alone that saves us - *not* our baptism.

Baptism symbolizes the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Just as Noah and his family were passed through the death waters of the Flood to begin a new life, so baptism pictures that same truth for the believer today. Baptism does not remove sin, and it does not symbolize the washing away of sin (v21). It symbolizes or pictures our identification with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection. And it is the death, burial and resurrection of Christ that saves us - **not** the baptism!

Now we, with a clear conscience before God, acknowledge this truth in Christian baptism. When we are baptized, we identify ourselves with Jesus Christ in His death, and burial, and resurrection. We acknowledge that the work of Christ has saved us, and we now want to separate from our old life and live a new life in Christ.

Doctrinal Points

1. There is blessing ahead for believers who return good for evil.

Verses 8-9: *“Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous; not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing.”*

Do you return evil for evil – or do you return good for evil? Returning good for evil doesn’t mean that you sweep sin under the rug, or that you let people get away with wrongdoing. But what about people who cut you down, or talk behind your back? If you can hold your tongue, God says that you will inherit a blessing (v9).

By the way, the phrase, *“all of you be of one mind”* (v8) does not mean that we, as believers, have to agree with each other on every detail! **Unity** in Christ does **not** require **uniformity** in every detail of Christian living - but it does require family cooperation, support, and love.

In verses 10-12 Peter quoted parts of Psalm 34 to back up his point: there is blessing ahead for believers who return good for evil.

2. There is blessing ahead for believers who suffer for righteousness.

Verses 13-14: *“And who is he who will harm you if you become followers of what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you are blessed. “And do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled.”*

Have you ever suffered for saying or doing the right thing? A young man I know lost his job in a restaurant because, as a Christian, he refused to serve some food that he knew had not been handled properly in the restaurant kitchen. It did not meet government regulations for safe food preparation. He was willing to suffer for doing what was right.

We must always operate in good conscience (v16), even though we may be labeled as intolerant - or mocked - or even maligned (v16). Our five-year-old granddaughter, Ingrid, is already being taught the theory of evolution in kindergarten. She knows that the Bible teaches Creation, and she's just the kind of child who is not afraid to speak up and tell the class or the teacher that evolution is not true! As a result, even as a young girl, she may suffer for this, now and in the days ahead. But the Lord will bless her for standing up for what is right - and He will bless every believer who suffers for doing and saying what is right.

There is blessing ahead for believers who suffer for righteousness.

Practical Application

Study "Christian evidences"!

One of the courses I teach at Emmaus Bible College is called "Christian Evidences." We study the body of evidence that's available to show the credibility of the Word of God and the Christian faith. I always tell my students that verse 15 **commands** us to study Christian evidences! "...*always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear.*"

The word in the phrase "*to give an answer*" or "*to give a defense*" is the Greek word from which we get the word "apologetics." Apologetics doesn't mean you're sorry for something you did! No! Apologetics means "a defense of the Christian faith." Can you defend the Christian faith? Do you have answers for people who question your faith? There are answers, and there's a lot of evidence!

We sometimes feel fearful because we're afraid that "the unbelievers have the big guns" and "we only have pea shooters." No! ***It's the other way around!*** But in order to use our "big guns," we have to learn some evidences for the Christian faith. And we have to have our answers ready!

Archaeology supports the Bible. Science supports the Bible. The Dead Sea Scrolls support the Bible. The Laws of Thermodynamics support the Bible.

If you would like to get more into Christian evidences, check out our Growing Christians website:

www.growingchristians.org. And when you get there, study the course on Christian Evidences. Why? Because we should "*always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you...*"

Study Christian evidences - it's a **command** in Scripture!