

A few years ago, I, like most people, was amazed by one of those fads that periodically sweeps the US—at the time I’m thinking of, someone had discovered that you could use a computer somehow to generate “art” that would have a picture “hidden” in it. It is called Magic Eye 3D art. There would be instructions with the picture to hold it close to your nose and then pull it away gradually, and then you’d see the hidden picture of the deer, or the car, or whatever it was that the designer had hidden in the picture...everybody had a theory, it seemed like, on the “best” way to see the real message of the picture...squint your eyes, cross your eyes, unfocus your eyes, you name it, everybody had a tip on how to look at these pictures. And it would make me a little crazy when I’d be standing in front of the art store at the mall, looking at one of these pictures in the window, and not seeing a thing, and people would be walking up and saying, “ooh, look at that, there’s a Kodiak bear in that picture...” and then they’d walk away and I’d still be there squinting like mad at this picture and not seeing a thing.

Sometimes a passage in the Scriptures is like one of those pictures...you look at it and you look at it, and it seems like you’re not getting the message—and then you take a step back, look at it in context (in other words, look at the whole picture, rather than trying just to focus on one part), see it as the writer meant you to see and you understand what the passage is teaching. Our Scripture is one of those passages. It has been called one of the most difficult passages to understand in the New Testament, yet if we look at it in the right way; I think we’ll find that the problems it presents resolve themselves for us.

Put your “thinking caps” on because this feels at first read that Peter is suffer from attention deficit disorder. This has been one of the harder sections of scripture to interpret in the bible.

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. 1 Peter 3:18-22 NKJV

Peter is really trying to say something here. There is a flow and order to his words but at first they are not easy to find. We will walk through this together and I think you will find that not only is it theologically foundational but that it is also personally practical. Write these three words down if you are taking notes: crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. You will find that Peter seeks to encourage us by including these events in his teaching.

Let’s wade into this together:

1. Jesus the victim: Our Model to follow

Remember that Peter is writing this letter to first century Christians and that he is emphasizing both submission and suffering. The beauty of the Bible is its ability to translate across the spectrum of time and geography. In other words, although these words were written two thousand plus years ago we can still find them meaningful and life altering today. The Bible was written for all of us.

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 1 Peter 3:18 NKJV

Once again the theme of suffering is quietly added to Peter's writings, this time using Jesus as an example. He was suffering for doing good which is what Peter has been writing about in the verses before.

He is our model for how to suffer graciously. When we face any kind of suffering in our lives Jesus is our model to follow.

Some people would see Him as a baby in a manger, and their image of Christ would be the Christmas image. Some people would see Him as a little child, perhaps living in a carpenter shop and on one occasion confounding the religious leaders of Jerusalem. Some people would see Him as a gentle loving teacher. Some people would see Him as a compassionate and powerful healer who could heal the sick and raise the dead. Some people would see Him as a courageous, bold and fiery preacher who got great crowds together and spoke to them the Word of God. Some would see Him as a virtual model of manhood, the model man, the consummate human being. And all of those images of Christ would to one degree or another be true. And we can all learn from His life, as we look at the perfections of His person, at His goodness, His kindness, His sympathy, His concern, His care, His tenderness, His forgiveness, His wisdom, His understanding, His trust in God. As we look at all of those characteristics of Christ, they are images that are instructive for us. And we can learn from them.

But there is an image of Christ that surpasses all of those and, in a sense, is the truest perception of Christ and the one that is most necessary. Paul summed it up when he said this, "I am determined to know nothing among you except Christ and...what? Him Crucified."

The proper vision of Christ is as the crucified one. The truest and purest perspective of the person and work of Christ is found in viewing Him as the suffering Jesus. That surpasses all the others. And so, as we look unto Jesus who is the author and finisher of our faith, we must look at Him in His suffering, that's the key. The focal point for every Christian must be on the suffering Christ, the crucified Christ is our vision.

²¹ For God called you to do good, even if it means suffering, just as Christ suffered^[k] for you. He is your example, and you must follow in his steps. ²² He never sinned, nor ever deceived anyone.

²³ He did not retaliate when he was insulted, nor threaten revenge when he suffered. He left his case in the hands of God, who always judges fairly. 1 Peter 2:21-22 NLT

Christ is our model to follow when it comes to suffering.

2. Jesus the vindicated:

Our Messenger of faith

He was crucified but He overcame it all. Let's look again at these difficult to understand verses.

“ . . . 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. . . .”

1 Peter 3:18-21 NKJV

We will take two looks at this. I want us to try to understand the flow of Peter's writing in context and then make application for our lives today.

Jesus was put to death, Peter writes, but made alive by the Spirit. He then goes into a long and dramatic sentence about Jesus preaching to the spirits in prison who were formerly disobedient. He is referring to all disobedient people whose souls are awaiting final judgment.

One of the most missing elements about the Easter story that rarely is preached or taught is that Jesus descended into hell in the hours between his death and resurrection. It was in these moments that his being brought to life by the Spirit while in hell, preached and taught a lesson to those that could have at one time accepted the mercy and grace of God.

By way of illustration Peter uses the souls that were lost when the flood covered the earth and only Noah's family was saved.

He then uses baptism as an example of the power of Christ's resurrection. In His resurrection Christ was vindicated of all wrong doing and He established a hope that we can build our faith on.

All of this points to one thing. Because Jesus Christ was able to resurrect from the dead He became victorious over sin, death, hell and the grave. With the resurrection of Christ comes the message of faith, hope and salvation.

You see I'm not sure that many of us really realize what salvation is all about but the fact is that Jesus Christ died to pay the price for your sins and mine. Because of that when we come to Him for salvation our life should be transformed in amazing and dramatic ways. That's what the Bible is all about. It is filled with words that teach us how to be like Christ. How to live in a way that pleases Him every day.

Sometimes I see people in our church claim to be Christians and yet nothing really changes. The things they were doing before starting to attend church they keep right on doing. Listen to me very carefully . . . the hope of salvation and faith in Christ is one that will change you from the inside out. You will be a different person. You will no longer lie, you will no longer cheat or

steal or engage in sexual situations outside of marriage that are not acceptable in the Word of God. You will be kind and longsuffering and gracious. You will love others as you love yourself including the unlovable. You will seek and find victory of habits and addictions that you know are harmful for you.

Watching people do this is the hardest thing I do in this vocation. You know why? Because I know that Jesus didn't pay the ultimate price of death and suffering so that we could just keep on doing whatever we want to do and living however we want to live. The Bible is so clear. It is in black and white and yet many have practiced a cut and paste method of theology to find a way to get some kind of fictitious stamp of approval on their sinful lifestyle. It blows me away sometimes to the point that I don't know how to keep standing up here and preaching.

It takes me back to some of my earliest days of preaching in my first church when I realized how futile my words seemed to be. I can't change your life but Jesus can. I can't deliver you from your sinful ways but Jesus can. I can't preach you into heaven but Jesus can give you a life changing faith that will overhaul your life in such a way that others will come to know and that something has changed. If you've kept the same habits and same values and same lack of morals and you still do everything just like you used to except you go to church and you think that you are a Christian or a follower of Jesus Christ. . . I have extremely important news for you. Jesus Christ coming into your life will produce more evidence than that. Your parents will know it, your spouse will know it, your children will know it, the people you work with will know it, your neighbors will know it and in some cases your dog may even know it because you quit mistreating him every time he gets in your way.

Jesus was vindicated and He became our way to faith.

"Jesus. It's a little name. A small word.

Say this little name in public, however, in a way other than an obscenity, and stand back and watch the fireworks.

This little name is like a tiny detonator that triggers a nuclear warhead.

You can say "God," and you won't get a squeak.

You can say "Our Father/Mother in Heaven," and few will flinch.

You can say "Great Spirit," and people will nod in approval.

You can say "Allah" and you will be deemed tolerant.

But say "Jesus" and just wait for the sonic boom.

Articles will appear in the paper. Reprimands will be posted from the home office. Suits will be threatened by the civil liberties block.

So don't say Jesus.

Jesus is divisive, and now is a time for unity.

Jesus is an extremist, and that must mean right wing.

Jesus is exclusive, so His name amounts to hate speech.

Keep His name to yourself. Cloister it in your church. Lock it in your prayer closet. Close it between the covers of your Bible. But for God's sake, don't voice it in the public square!

It's immodest. It's immoral. It's unloving.

Only one problem: Jesus is God.
Only one problem: Jesus alone brings salvation.
Only one problem: All other gods are nothing.

So speak His name aloud. Shout it from the mountain. Whisper it in the dark. Write it in the sky.

That's not hate, its hope."

3. Jesus the victorious: Our Messiah to the finish!

“. . . who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him.” 1 Peter 3:22 NKJV

The ascension of Christ to heaven should spur us on daily to join Him someday. We are called in the Bible over and over to be like Christ; to follow Him daily and faithfully. Someday it will be worth it all. Someday we will understand why we were called to be “strangers and foreigners” as we lived on this earth. We will understand why we are called to live differently than the unbelieving world around us.

As this world spins more and more out of control our goal ought to be to deepen our walk with our Messiah who sits at the right hand of the Father. He is our Savior, our Redeemer and the One that we should be willing to deny ourselves for as we follow Him.

I'm personally at that age where I can look back and even look at younger people and see mistakes that they are making. I see it sometimes in my family, I can see it at work and I can see it in the generations that are coming behind. I feel it in the denomination that our church is affiliated with at times so strong that I can become easily distressed and burdened. I am painfully aware that I don't fit in many ways with the interpretation of church these days.

I don't know where I will end up in ministry. It may be here or it may be in a place that I can't even imagine or I may die tomorrow but this one thing I know. Because Jesus was victorious, He will be my Messiah to the finish. Have I always been perfect . . .? No and in fact I have walked through some days that I will always be sorry for but I will not turn away from Him. I will not forsake Him. I will press on and follow Jesus every day. There is no turning back, He is my Messiah and Savior to the finish.

The blind song writer, Fanny Crosby declared her faith in Christ this way:

When my life work is ended, and I cross the swelling tide,
When the bright and glorious morning I shall see;
I shall know my Redeemer when I reach the other side,
And His smile will be the first to welcome me.

Through the gates to the city in a robe of spotless white,
He will lead me where no tears will ever fall;

In the glad song of ages I shall mingle with delight;
But I long to meet my Savior first of all.

*I shall know Him, I shall know Him,
And redeemed by His side I shall stand,
I shall know Him, I shall know Him,
By the print of the nails in His hand.*

Adoniram Judson the famed missionary of bygone days said this on his deathbed. In fact these are his final words: I go with the gladness of a boy bounding away from a school. I feel so strong in Christ.”

Now you might say well I don't think it's my time to die yet but I still am willing to follow Jesus and suffer like Christ if necessary.

Annie Johnson Flint's life on earth could never be measured in any degree by comfort and ease; quite the contrary, from childhood her body endured the onslaught of Rheumatoid Arthritis until she could no longer rise from bed. Over the years the affliction took a great toll, leaving her with no choice but to seek some comfort from sleeping and resting on soft pillows. Her body developed serious bed sores and finally she suffered the ravages of cancer.

Yet her attitude through all the struggles with pain and confinement may best be expressed through one of her great Christian poems that has been set to music in many hymnals. Her faith in God and His purpose, reflected through these words, portray her deep commitment and disposition of hope and peace:

He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater;
He sendeth more strength when the labors increase.
To added affliction He addeth His mercy;
To multiplied trials, His multiplied peace.

His love has no limit;
His grace has no measure.
His power has no boundary known unto men.
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus, He giveth and giveth and giveth again.

When we have exhausted our store of endurance,
When our strength has failed ere the day is half done,
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources,
Our Father's full giving is only begun.

His love has no limit;
His grace has no measure.
His power has no boundary known unto men.
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus, He giveth and giveth and giveth again