

Have you ever been an outsider in a hostile environment? It's hard when there are threats to assimilate or suffer. Peter writes to Christians as outsiders in a hostile environment to teach them how to live in such a context. This morning we enter a section of his letter in which he lays a foundation for Christian life in a hostile world. The main point is: The Gospel is the Final Word. In five ways, we'll see that Jesus Christ crucified, risen, and reigning in glory is the final word on everything.

In verse 13, we see that the gospel is the final word on God's favor. "Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good?" The rhetorical question expects the answer, "No one!" But Peter's readers *were* being harmed for being zealous for what is good! So, what does Peter mean?

In the preceding verse, Peter quoted Psalm 34, which encourages us to be zealous for good based on two promises. First, "The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer." That is, when you are zealous for what is good, God is for you! And verse 12, quotes Psalm 34:16: "The face of the Lord is against those who do evil, to cut off the memory of them from the earth." In other words, God will obliterate evil-doers. They will suffer *ultimate harm*.

It's in that context that Peter asks, "who is there to *harm* you...?" "Who will do you *ultimate harm*?" The answer is "no one." "If God is for us, who can be against us?" The message of the gospel is that God is for us in Christ. Christ's death and resurrection guarantee God's favor.

In verses 14-18, we see that the gospel is the final word in the face of suffering. "But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake you will be blessed." Christians will suffer for the sake of Christ. But Peter reminds us of what the Messiah said: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."<sup>1</sup> Because Christ assures us of ultimate blessing, we suffer without ultimate fear. So, he writes, "Have no fear of them, nor be troubled..."

Instead of fear, he says, "in your hearts honor (regard) Christ the Lord as holy..." "Holy" describes a person or thing's relationship to a covenant. What is "holy" is devoted solely to covenant use in strict accordance with covenant stipulations. So, to "honor Christ as holy in your hearts" means to "believe that Jesus is entirely devoted to the stipulations of the New Covenant."

What does the New Covenant stipulate for Christ? Look at verse 18—"Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God..." Christ's purpose is to deliver us from sin through suffering *so that he might bring us to God*. He's holy, so he *will* do it. The world and Satan say, "If you will not forsake Christ, then we will destroy you." The Christian replies, "Jesus is holy—devoted to bringing me to God. You can do nothing because I belong to my Lord, and he is committed to my good."

In verses 15-18, we see that the gospel is the final word in our witness. "...always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you..." Recall how Peter described our hope in chapter one:

[God] has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. ... set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup>

We have a "living hope *through* the resurrection of Jesus Christ." The source and reason for our hope is the resurrection. Peter defines our hope as "an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 5:10 (ESV)

<sup>2</sup> 1 Peter 1:3-5, 13 (ESV)

unfading, kept in heaven for you.” All of those adjectives describe the resurrection body of Jesus. Our *hope* is a resurrection like Christ’s. The reason we have this hope is because Jesus was raised from the dead, God made us alive, and is keeping our inheritance for us in heaven, even as he is keeping *us*, guarding us “through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.”

So, when someone asks us to explain why we will not compromise or deny our faith, why we live with hope, we answer with the gospel: Jesus died for my sins and rose from the dead. Through his resurrection, I have been born again. God forgave my sin, made me new, adopted me, and gave me an inheritance that can never be destroyed because God is keeping it for me in heaven. God is sustaining my faith in Jesus, keeping me until the day when Jesus returns to raise me from the dead.

We give this answer humbly, not with arrogance or swagger—we “do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience...” Gentleness is the overflow of humility, which is seeing yourself accurately. The gospel humbles us. God saved us; we did not save ourselves. The only thing that differentiates us from our persecutors is God’s grace. So, we speak gently, as one thief to another, inviting them to share our hope that Christ will remember us in his kingdom.

Peter says, “do it with gentleness and *respect*.” “Respect” here is reverence to God, which is why he adds “with a good conscience.” As we answer the world, we represent the Lord and not ourselves. So, we don’t violate our conscience with lies or ethical compromise. We show gentleness to our neighbor and reverence to our Lord.

In verse 16, Peter tells us why: “so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.” He doesn’t say, “Be gentle and reverent because you catch more flies with honey...” or “If you reply with a good conscience, God will bless it and people will flock to Christ!” He says the opposite—*so that* those who revile our good behavior may be put to shame.

So, Peter says, “...it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God’s will, than for doing evil.” It is better to suffer for the gospel now and be vindicated on the last day than to deny the gospel for present comfort and be ashamed on the last day.

Verses 18-19 tell us the gospel is the final word over sin, death, and the devil. “[Because] Christ also suffered once for sins...” Jesus died *for sins*. He bore the guilt of sin and received the wrath of God. But these sins were not his own, for he suffered as “the righteous for the unrighteous.” Christ was righteous, entirely sinless. We are “unrighteous”—corrupted by sin. Jesus suffered in our place “that he might bring us to God.” When sin is removed, so is the penalty for sin—death. With our sin removed, we can be raised from the dead in glory to live with God.

Christ did this, “being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit...” He suffered in his body, and the Spirit brought him back to life. In this summary explanation of the gospel, we see that Jesus conquered sin and death. What enemy remains? The old serpent, Satan. So, in verses 19-20, Peter assures us of Christ’s victory over the devil’s spiritual forces.

Peter writes, “in which,” referring back to Christ’s body that was crucified and resurrected. In this glorified body, Christ “went and proclaimed” his resurrection victory “to the spirits in prison.” These are the “spirits” who “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.” I take this to refer to the events in Genesis 6, where “the sons of God came in to the daughters of man and they bore children to them.” I understand that to mean rebellious spirits (demons), in some physical form, took human wives and had children. This event was a sort of culmination of the wickedness on earth. In response, God poured out his wrath, covering the earth with water, destroying everything on the earth. Apparently, he then consigned these spirits to prison to await final judgment.

After his resurrection, Christ went to them in his resurrected body to herald the good news. He did not preach the gospel so they could be saved, but so they would see his victory and be ashamed. "You tried to ruin God's plan to crush the Serpent's head through the seed of woman. But I am here now, the Seed of the Woman, who conquered sin, death and the power of your ruler, the devil."

Why does Peter want us to know this? The Christian situation is analogous to that of Noah's day. God has promised salvation from coming judgment. While we wait, people mock us, hate us, and try to interfere with God's salvation. Peter argues from the greater to the lesser: If Christ has already proclaimed his victory over spiritual powers, then what reason do we have to fear the plots of mere humans? We have none. The gospel is the final word—Christ has conquered sin, death, and the devil.

Finally, in verse 21, we see that the gospel is the final word in our salvation. Thinking of the waters of judgment in Noah's day, Peter makes a connection to baptism, "Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you." Formerly, water covered the earth in judgment, killing everything on the earth. However, eight persons trusted God's promise, refusing the world and embracing the means of salvation God provided—the ark—and it brought them safely through. Peter says that baptism—a ritual in which a person is plunged under water—corresponds to the this and now saves you. How so?

First, he clarifies how baptism does *not* save—"not as a removal of dirt from the body." Baptism does not save magically or mechanically. Merely dunking flesh in water is neither saving nor baptism. Then he tells us how it *does* save, giving us the clearest definition of baptism in all the New Testament. "Baptism now saves you...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."

Baptism saves "as an appeal." An appeal is a request (or a prayer) in which you ask someone for something. In baptism, the baptized makes a conscious request "to God." They ask God "for a good conscience." A good conscience is one that has no guilt. So, this is a prayer for forgiveness.

The baptized person makes this appeal "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." They appeal to God on the basis of the gospel—"Father, your Son Jesus was brought to life after he died for my sins and was exalted to your right hand, where he reigns over all things. I believe this and appeal to you through His death and resurrection to forgive my sins."

Baptism is a sinner's prayer—only it is not said with air passing over vocal chords but with a body symbolically judged and buried, raised and justified. Being immersed is symbolic of judgment and death, signifying our death and burial with Christ through faith. Coming up out of the water signifies being brought safely through judgment—being raised from the dead with Christ. Christ is the ark that brings us safely through the waters of judgment!

Peter reminds us of our baptism to remind us of the good news. Christ really has conquered sin, death, and the devil. Those things do not have the last word. The gospel is the final word. In your baptism, you appealed to God in faith, asking him to forgive your sin through Christ's work. Therefore, the reign of Christ over all things guarantees your ultimate blessing in Him.

If you don't know Christ, I invite you to believe in him and to appeal to God in faith through baptism. And if you have appealed to God in faith through baptism, then I invite you to remember and proclaim the gospel as our Lord commanded, by eating and drinking his body and blood, given for the forgiveness of sin.