

Loving Life

1 Peter 3:8-22
David H. Roper

We have come to the section in 1 Peter which is one of the most difficult passages to interpret in all of Scripture. This passage has frazzled more nerves and boggled more minds than perhaps any other in Scripture. Yet, rightly understood, it offers great comfort and encouragement to us. It is intended to be understood, I believe.

It is a summary passage. It begins, "To sum up, let all be harmonious, etc.," and then there follows a catalog of some central qualities of the Christian life. It is Peter's method to teach and then to go back and gather up the great principles he has been stressing and restate them in a different way. In this section from verse 8 to the end of the chapter, Peter underscores four great qualities every Christian ought to exhibit in the face of adversity, and then there follows a statement about the power which makes possible that kind of life.

Whenever we read any section in 1 Peter, we need to bear in mind that the context of this book is that of suffering injustice. It was written to people who were being mistreated and persecuted. Their lives were filled with stress - not because they were unrighteous, but merely because they were righteous. Against this backdrop of misunderstanding and injustice, Peter writes to encourage them and to instruct them. He begins in verse 8 with a call to gracious and forgiving conduct in the face of adversity:

To sum up, let all be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil, or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing.

For

**"Let him who means to love life and see good days
Refrain his tongue from evil and his lips from
speaking guile.**

**And let him turn away from evil and do good;
Let him seek peace and pursue it.
For the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous,
And His ears attend to their prayer,
But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil."
And who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for
what is good?"**

You will recognize that this is a call to good behavior. It is an exhortation to be unified and sympathetic, brotherly and kindhearted, in the face of treatment which is unjust. Now, it is one thing to be this way when people act graciously toward you, when they love you and treat you as they should; but it is another thing to respond this way when people do not. That is difficult. But Peter is saying that it is possible for us to behave "excellently," as he uses the term in the second chapter, despite the way people may treat us.

We tend to justify our misbehavior when people do not behave the right way toward us. If we are a young person growing up in a family, and our parents are harsh and unloving, it is easy for us to justify rebellion. We feel it is only right and proper. "That's the sort of treatment I'm getting, and so I can respond the same way." Or if we are a husband or a wife, and our mate is not responding the right way, it seems that we can justify misbehavior. Or if our government is unrighteous, we think we can justify a little cheating on our income tax. If our employer is not

fair in his business practices, we justify a little corner cutting here and there.

But Peter says, "No, we cannot. No matter how adverse our circumstances may be, no matter how unrighteous those in authority over us might be, we must be sympathetic and kindly.

Peter says we are to do this because there are certain things which naturally follow. One is that we receive a blessing. He goes back into Psalm 34 to tell us what that blessing is. It is stated in this expression in verse 10: "If you want to love life and see good days, then refrain your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking guile." That is what we all want. We want to love life and see good days. We want to be able to look back on the day and say, "This has been a good day," instead of "This day has been a bummer!" Peter's point is that it is not the circumstances which make a day bad; it is our attitude toward the circumstances. Good days are determined by our attitude toward those around us. We must, as Peter says, "Turn away from evil and do good; refrain our tongue from evil and our lips from speaking guile." If we do that, "the eyes of the Lord will be upon us, and his ears will attend to our prayer." He sees us, he hears us, and we have that sense of his presence which makes possible an entirely different perspective on life.

There is a second thing Peter says will occur if we have this attitude toward those who misuse us. Verse 13: "And who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good?" Peter's point is that, in the normal state of affairs, those who abuse you will correct their behavior if you do what is right. Now, that is not always true. There are some people who are so hardened and resistant to the truth that nothing you do will change them. But normally, if we behave the right way in a circumstance, if we repay evil with good, if we turn the other cheek, if we reply with a soft answer when someone addresses us with a harsh word, normally they will not harm us. Not only will our attitude toward our circumstances change, but our circumstances will change as well.

This is the first quality of life that Peter stresses to us. When we are faced with injustice, we are to respond with a gracious and forgiving spirit. The second characteristic is given in verse 14 and the first part of verse 15:

But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. And do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled, but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts . . .

The second quality we ought to exhibit is fearlessness, and an untroubled heart -- a quiet, restful spirit. The people to whom Peter was writing knew the Old Testament quite well. They knew that this command, "And do not fear their intimidation and do not be troubled, etc.," is a quotation from the Old Testament, and they would have understood its context. So perhaps a little background would be helpful to us. This is a quotation from the eighth chapter of Isaiah. It is significant because at the time in his ministry when he wrote this, Isaiah was experiencing persecution for righteousness' sake.

He was called upon to prophesy at a time when the nation of Judah was in decline spiritually and morally. He began his ministry during the reign of king Uzziah, who was a good king, at least in the early years of his reign. In his later years he contracted leprosy, and so his son Ahaz became co-regent. Whereas Uzziah's philosophy had been "In God we trust," Ahaz's philosophy was "In Assyria we trust." He was confident in his political wisdom, and so he made alliances with the nation of Assyria. He felt that by so doing he could protect Judah.

In Isaiah 6 there is a reference to the fact that Uzziah the king died, and if you read between the lines you come to the conclusion that Isaiah panicked, because Uzziah was the one who was keeping Ahaz in check. The only thing that prevented Ahaz from destroying the nation was the strong hand of his father. And Isaiah thought that when Uzziah died the nation would come to ruin. But Isaiah 6 records an incident that took place in the year Uzziah died. The passage begins this way: "In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted..." The point is, though the earthly king had died, the Governor of the universe is still alive and well, and he is able to take care of Ahaz. Isaiah was able to rest in that. And though he knew that he would be misunderstood and rejected by the people -- God told him he would -- he could be strong because he knew God was in control, and not Ahaz.

In chapter 7 he was called upon to prophesy against Ahaz and to tell him that God was not pleased with this

alliance. Ahaz rejected his counsel. The people rejected it and tried to convict him of treason. And in chapter 8 God said to Isaiah, in the words recorded here in 1 Peter, "Do not be intimidated by their attempts to make you afraid, but sanctify the Lord of hosts as Lord." That is, "Remember what you learned from that vision of God. God is in control. Give him the place of lordship in your life that he occupies in the universe." Peter very easily transposes the name of Christ for that of Jehovah, because Jesus was the Lord who was high and lifted up in Isaiah's vision. And so Peter says, "Do not be afraid, do not be intimidated, but sanctify Christ as Lord. Recognize who he is -- the Governor of the universe, the King of the world. He is in control. That is what keeps us from going to pieces when everything around us is shaking apart. We have a Lord who is in control."

The third characteristic is in verse 15:

. . . always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence . . .

Not only are we to have a gracious, forgiving spirit, and an untroubled mind, but we are to present a reasonable defense of our hope. We are never to defend ourselves - God does that quite well - but we are to defend the hope that we have. Because if a person can live with an untroubled mind and can be gracious in a world like this today, there must be some explanation for that behavior beyond the man's own personality. And people will ask you the source of your power. "In a circumstance like that," Peter says, "be ready to give them an answer."

It ought to be a reasonable answer - not an emotional response, not a theological discourse, but an explanation of what Christ has done in your life, and what he can do in the lives of others. And, with the beautiful balance which is maintained in Scripture, Peter says, "Do so with gentleness and patience, without anger, and with reverence. We do not need to be argumentative. We can explain quietly and gently, and with respect for the hearer's feelings, what Christ means to us. We are to make a reasoned defense of our hope.

Most of us become very awkward at this point. We can talk about the weather or sports or our latest operation, and do so with complete peace. But when we start talking about the gospel we freeze and clutch and our voice becomes squeaky, and we come across too heavily, and we become argumentative and scare people away. One of my favorite stories concerns a Christian barber who became convinced of his need to share Christ with others. So he determined that the next Saturday he would share the gospel with someone who came into his shop. Throughout the fateful day, as opportunities arose, he froze and found himself unable to say anything. But the tension was building, and he knew he had to say something. Finally the last customer came in the door and asked for a shave, and the barber thought, "This is the one!" So he prepared himself mentally, wound up his courage, lathered the man's face, got his razor out, and began to strop it. As he walked around to the front of the chair, his voice was quivering and his hand was shaking, but he said, "Brother, are you prepared to die?" The guy jumped right through the plate glass window and ran screaming down the street!

Unfortunately, that is the way most of us share our faith. But we do not need to be fearful and anxious. Nor should we be harsh and argumentative. In fact, Paul said, "The servant of God must not strive, but be gentle to all men, able to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those who oppose them selves." Gently, and with respect for their sensibilities, we can tell people the logical reason behind our hope. We are to be bold, not brash. We are not to barge in unceremoniously and trample all over people's personalities. Rather, with sensitivity and grace we are to give a reasoned explanation for the hope that is in us. That is the third characteristic, and in verse 16 we have the fourth:

. . . and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.

The fourth quality of life is a good conscience. There are two ways to have a good conscience. One is to live a life of obedience to the truth, because it is our obedience to the truth which is our authority. It is when people see something truly miraculous about our life that they will listen to us. As Nietzsche said, "If you looked more redeemed, I might listen to you about your Redeemer." If we genuinely exhibit the life of Christ, then people will

be attracted to it, and they will want to know the basis of our power.

But you and I know that we do not always behave that way. We fail frequently, and we fail in front of people who do not know Christ. Our tendency is to cover up, to become hypocritical and to fake it, or to give the impression that we do not have problems and we do not fail. So there is another way to have a good conscience. It is to confess sin, and to receive forgiveness and cleansing from the Lord. It is this openness and honesty which, again, will draw people to the Lord, not perfection, because if we have to wait for perfection, we are all disqualified -- we can never say a word.

A friend whom I met in the Pacific Northwest some time ago was telling me of an incident that occurred in her family. She had gotten into one of the worst arguments she ever had with her husband, and she was enraged, storming around the house, swearing under her breath, slamming doors. She walked through the kitchen and opened every cabinet door, then went back through slamming everyone. She walked by the screen door which led out into the side yard, and there, standing on the other side of the door with an awe-struck look on her face, was her next door neighbor with a cup of sugar in her hand. This was the lady she had been trying to lead to Christ for the past two years. Of course, my friend was thunderstruck. She invited her in, apologized, admitted her own weakness, and told of her Lord who always forgives. Her neighbor came to know Christ that day - because of her honesty. It is not failure which disqualifies us; it is our dishonesty and our tendency to cover up.

So Peter says, "Maintain a good conscience." Obedience? Yes, because we can be obedient. But when we fail, deal with the failure openly and honestly. Paul says, "I always exercise myself to have a conscience void of offense toward God and man." That ought to be the pattern of our life as well.

These, then, are the four great qualities that Christians ought to exhibit in times of stress. We are to be gracious and forgiving, and to return good for evil. Secondly, we are to have an untroubled, unruffled heart. We are not to fear or to give way to anxiety. Third, we are to be able to present a rational defense of the hope that we have in Christ. And finally, we are to maintain a good conscience.

Now, I do not know how this strikes you, but it strikes me as overpowering, because I know that I do not have the capacity to live life like this. I am just as defensive and retaliatory as anyone else. I am just as inclined to cover up, and just as fearful about my witness. There has to be another power. It won't come from me!

And so Peter, in the remaining verses, explains the basis of our authority. This is an exceedingly difficult passage. There are probably as many interpretations of it as there are interpreters, but here we go. It is much like taking a swim in one of the mountain lakes of the high Sierra. There is no way to enter the water gradually; you must jump in. So let us read the passage, and then I'll go back and explain briefly what I think Peter is saying.

For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong. For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water. And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you -- not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience -- through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him.

The key to this passage is verse 17. "It is better if God should will it so that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong." As you remember, this is the theme of this book. It is better that you do God's will, do what is right, even though you suffer injustice. Now, we might respond to that by saying, "Peter, you don't know what you're talking about! You don't live in my world. You have to stand up for your rights. You have to fight. You'll get nowhere in the world living like that today." Peter says, "Listen, if you want an example of the principle that it is better to do it this way, look at Jesus." He is the illustration Peter used earlier in exhorting slaves who were tempted to grumble under their lot. They were being beaten unjustly, but Peter said that was what they were called to, "since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in his steps."

Here again he alludes to the example of Jesus: "If you want an example that it is better to do it this way, look at Jesus. Because he, the only just man who, ever lived, suffered injustice. And the result was that he brought us to God."

The fundamental problem in the universe today is: How can I get to God? If people are genuinely honest that is the cry of their heart: "How can I find my way to God?" Jesus solved the problem. He brought us to God by suffering unjustly. The term Peter uses which is translated "bring us to" God is actually a technical term which means "arrange an audience" with some royal personage. That is difficult to do, unless you have someone who knows the person and can bridge the gap.

When John Landrith and I were in London, we were wandering around like a couple of Innocents Abroad. We happened to discover Downing Street, and we thought, "Well, we'll drop by and see where the Prime Minister lives." There was a courtyard, and a number of doors -- all of which looked the same. One of them had "10" on it, and we knew that was where he lived. People were going in and out of the door freely, and we thought that perhaps there were an office just inside, and we could go in and at least be able to say we had been in No.10 Downing Street. So we walked up to the door, and there was a rather large, immaculately dressed man standing by the door, with a large club in his hand. He said, "Excuse me, do you have an appointment?" I said, "No, sir." He said, "Well then, you may not come in." He was very gentle, but he had a will of steel, and he had that big club! So I learned that an unknown commoner like myself does not walk right through the door of No. 10 Downing Street. If it is that difficult to get into the presence of the Prime Minister, how much more difficult is it to go into the presence of God? Jesus solved that problem, and that is why his way is better.

Peter goes on to explain what Jesus did to bring us to God. Notice these phrases in verse 18: "...having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit . . ." The first phrase, "having been put to death in the flesh," is easy to understand. He is referring to the events of the crucifixion, when Jesus flesh was put to death. The second, "made alive in the spirit", is not so easy to interpret. The first question we have to ask is this: Is he referring to his human spirit, or the Holy Spirit? If it is the Holy Spirit, then it is by means of the Holy Spirit that he was made alive, the Holy Spirit being the agent. If it is his human spirit, then it means his own spirit was made alive. As you know, in the Greek of Peter's original writing there were no capitals, and thus there is no direct way to know which he intended. Some translations put a capital "S" here; others the small "s". The New American Standard Version has a small "s", and I believe that is correct because this phrase is in parallel construction with that referring to his human flesh. He was put to death in the flesh, and he was made alive in the spirit.

Actually, two steps are omitted here -- assumed, but not stated explicitly. Jesus was put to death in the flesh, and he was put to death in the spirit; he was made alive in the spirit, and he was made alive in the flesh. Note that he does not say Christ was "kept alive" in the spirit, but "made alive". His spirit died and then was made alive again. Now, the cross is mystery, and we cannot understand all of it. But here it appears the veil is parted a bit, and we can see something of what actually transpired when Jesus went to the cross. He not only died physically for our sins; his spirit died as well. He experienced spiritual death, which is separation from God. In other words, Jesus went to Hell. That is what is demanded by my sins. My sins are so heinous there is nothing to do but put me to death and put me in Hell. It is my sins that separate me from God. And Jesus bore that penalty, which involved not only his dying physically, but the death of his spirit.

This explains why, when Jesus was on the cross, he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This question was not for his sake. He knew why the Father had forsaken him. This was a quotation from a Psalm which goes on to answer the question by implying that God forsook him because he was too holy to look upon sin. Jesus knew that when he became the sin-bearer the Father must separate himself from him. And he died physically, and he died spiritually. He experienced the full force of Hell.

But he did not remain there. His spirit was made alive" after this period of separation from God. He was taken out of hell. Psalm 16, a Messianic psalm which Peter himself quotes in Acts 2, says, "You will not abandon my soul to Hades." God allowed the spirit of Jesus to go there, but he didn't abandon him there. He brought him out. He made him alive in the spirit. That is what is meant by the closing words of the chapter: "...through the resurrection

of Jesus Christ, who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him."

In summary then, this is what Peter is saying: It is better to suffer injustice. Why? Because Jesus accomplished the highest good in the whole universe by suffering injustice. He became the sin-bearer who died, both in body and in spirit, and bore our sins fully. And now he reigns in heaven in authority over principalities and powers. And this is better than anything that ever happened in the whole history of the universe! So when you suffer unjustly, you are in good company. His way is better, do you see?

Peter says some other rather startling things in this passage. In verse 19 he says that while Jesus was in hell, he "made proclamation to the spirits now in prison." Two questions come to mind: Who are these spirits? And, what does "he made proclamation" mean? There are two possibilities in identifying these "spirits." They are either men, or angels. It is highly unlikely that these are men, for two reasons. Rarely in Scripture are men, living or dead, ever referred to as "spirits". Secondly, if they were men, why did Jesus make a proclamation to these men who lived in the time of Noah, and to no other men? Therefore it seems more reasonable to believe that these "spirits in prison" are angels. Throughout Scripture angels are referred to as "spirits."

But what angels is he referring to? In the Scripture there is a class of angels said to be confined in hell. They were confined there because of something that occurred during the time of Noah. This precisely fits our passage. In the Genesis 6 account of the events leading up to the Flood, there is mention of a race of men which inhabited the world and which was so wicked and so vile that the entire world had to be destroyed. These men were the product of a sexual relationship between demons and women. Fallen angels, who are called "the sons of God," cohabited with women who lived on the earth in those days. The result of that union was offspring called "the Nephilim," "the fallen ones" -- hideous, horrible, wicked men who invaded the earth and had to be destroyed. Such an invasion occurred again after the Flood, according to Genesis, and produced the ancestors of the giants the nation of Israel met when they went into the Promised Land. There is New Testament confirmation of this in 2 Peter 2:4:

For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment; and did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a preacher of righteousness, with seven others, when He brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly . . .

He goes on to say that God knows how to bring into judgment those who reject the truth, and to preserve those who obey it. Here he links the time of Noah with a class of angels who sinned and were cast into hell. Other confirmation is in Jude, verses 6 and 7:

And angels who did not keep their own domain, but abandoned their proper abode, He has kept in eternal bonds under darkness for the judgment of the great day. Just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them, since they in the same way as these indulged in gross immorality and went after strange flesh, are exhibited as an example . . .

Jude compares these angels that are confined with the people who lived in Sodom and Gomorrah, who were guilty of gross immorality and went after "strange flesh". The Greek term means "flesh of a different kind", or "alien flesh". These passages underscore what is said in the book of Genesis -- that sometime in prehistory, fallen angels invaded the human race and brought into the world wicked offspring who necessitated the destruction of the world. And because these demons did this, they were imprisoned. And it is to these demons in hell that Jesus preached.

What did he preach? Not a second chance to respond to the gospel. Their character seems to be fixed. They would not respond to the truth even if they could. So it is not a second opportunity to respond to the gospel but a proclamation of victory. Jesus has won, and he proclaims victory over all demonic hosts. That is what is meant in verse 22 of our passage in 1 Peter: "...who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him."

Now, there is one other issue to consider. Why does Peter refer, in verse 19, to the flood in the days of Noah, the fact of the destruction of the world, and the salvation of eight persons? Recall, if you will, the story of the Flood. God commanded Noah to build an ark, and Noah invested a good portion of his life in that ark. Then, when the rains came and the water began to rise, Noah and his family went into the ark, and God shut the door. And though the storm buffeted the ark, the ark was carried safely through the flood, finally coming to rest on the mountain, where Noah, his wife, his three sons and their wives, stepped out on dry land. Every thing else was destroyed, but Noah and his family endured because they were in the ark. Some translations imply that they were saved through the water. But that is not what the passage says. They were saved by the ark, passing through the water. It was not the water that saved them. The water would have drowned them. It was the ark that saved them.

Peter says, ". . . baptism now saves you That is sometimes interpreted to mean that water baptism saves us. But again, that is not what Peter is saying, at all. The Greek word translated "baptism" means "to place into". Essentially, the notion of water does not enter into the word at all. Peter is saying, ". . . being placed into Christ now saves you Noah was saved by being placed into the ark. The waves beat on the ark, and the entire world was destroyed. But Noah and his family were saved; they endured to the end. And Peter says that when you exercise faith in Jesus Christ, you are placed into Christ. The whole world may be destroyed around you.

Everything may be shaken. But you are safe and secure, because you are identified with Christ and all that he went through. When he died, when he was buried, when he went to hell, when he rose in authority over principalities and powers, you went through the same experience. We are placed into Christ, and all that he went through, so that, in him, we have been through the worst that the world can do, and we are safe and secure.

Now, that ought to maintain us when things go wrong. There can never be anything in your life as adverse as a universal flood. Noah was saved through the flood, and we are safe in Christ. He is our ark; we are complete in him. Aaron Wolfe, a nineteenth century hymnist, wrote:

Complete in Thee! no work of mine
May take, dear Lord, the place of Thine;
Thy blood hath pardon bought for me,
And I am now complete in Thee.

Complete in Thee! no more shall sin
Thy grace hath conquered, reign within;
Thy voice shall bid the tempter flee,
And I shall stand complete in Thee.

Father, how reassuring it is to know that we are in the ark, which is Christ Jesus! And though we may be buffeted, and storms may assail us, we thank you that we are secure, safe and sound, because we are in you. Lord, we thank you that we know this, and believe it, and that in times when we seem to be strained beyond our limits to endure, we may find strength in you, and be brought safety through. We thank you in Jesus' name, Amen.

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