

A RECONCILED PEOPLE

1 Peter 3:18a

February 1, 2009 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

Last week we saw that suffering for Christ, what Peter called “doing what is right” (v. 17) is often part of God’s means of both our personal sanctification as well as a powerful witness to others of the saving nature of the gospel. This morning it is fitting that we look at this one verse which has been aptly described as “one of the shortest and simplest, and yet one of the richest summaries given in the New Testament for the meaning of the Cross of Jesus.”¹ Here we see Peter’s supreme example of righteous suffering given in Christ’s death at Calvary. As Wayne Grudem points out, “Just as Christ endured unjust suffering for our salvation, Peter reasons, so we are blessed by God if we endure unjust suffering for the salvation of others.”² Grudem goes on to point out that this parallel is not complete at every point, however, because Christ actually earned our salvation by dying in our place. It is this glorious truth that Peter sets forth in this verse.

As I looked at this verse, I asked questions of the text as I often do in preparing a sermon. Why did Christ have to suffer death? What was the purpose of Christ’s death? What were the results of His death? There are two things we see in this verse as it relates to these questions, questions which Peter answers. What we see in this verse is that there is only one way that God’s justice towards sin could be fully satisfied, both as it relates to its guilt and its penalty, and His justice in reconciling sinners to Himself could be upheld, and that is through the substitutionary death of Christ for sinful man.

I. The Necessity of Christ’s Suffering

Why did Christ have to die? Peter answers that question in one short, succinct phrase, “**For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust.**” Peter reminds his readers that Christ’s suffering resulted in His death. He who was righteous, holy and spotless, without blemish and in perfect union and communion with God the Father, the One who had never sinned, “**also died.**” Why did Christ die?

1. Our sins

Peter says that Christ died “**for sins once for all.**” That little phrase alone captures both the deep importance and the correct practice of the Lord’s Supper that we will partake of together in a moment. The Scriptures teach that the penalty for sin is death, both physical and spiritual. In Genesis 2:16-17, “The LORD God commanded the man, saying, ‘From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.’” The moment our first parents took of the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, giving into the schemes of the Deceiver, death entered into the world. This death no man can escape for just like our first parents, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23) and the wages of that sin, what our sins earned and what we justly deserve from a holy God, is death as promised in the Garden (Rom. 6:23).

¹ J.M.E. Ross, *The First Epistle of Peter, A Devotional Commentary*, 151-152 form D. Edmund Hiebert, *1 Peter*, 235.

² Wayne Grudem, *TNT: 1 Peter*, 155.

However, when we contemplate this truth, we still must ask, “Why did Christ have to die?” He was without sin. Therefore, He was not under the penalty of death for sin. And yet, **“Christ also died for sins.”** In this we see the grace and glory of the gospel! In His death He paid the penalty for our sins. The spotless Lamb of God became sin for us. And all of this was at the hand of God the Father, who “made Him who knew no sin *to be sin* on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21). His death, then, was a *penal* death, fully satisfying the penalty for the sins of those who trust in His death for their sins. **“Christ died for sins”** means that He paid a debt He did not owe for those who owed a debt they could not pay.

This death, Peter continues, was **“once for all.”** This indicates that Christ’s death was a *sacrificial* death. The uniqueness of Christ’s work on the Cross is something that cannot be repeated. In the Old Testament, God instituted the necessity of a sacrifice for the sins of the people. It was necessary that sacrificial lambs, many lambs, be offered to God, again and again, to keep cleansing people from their sins because people sin over and over again. But Christ’s sacrificial death was **“once for all.”** The writer of Hebrews put it, “And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this *comes* judgment, so Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many” (Heb. 9:28). When Jesus cried out on the Cross, “It is finished” (Jn. 19:30) He meant that atonement, sacrifice, had been made once for all. John Murray, in his excellent book, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, refers to this once-for-all sacrifice as “the most solemn spectacle in all history, a spectacle unparalleled, unique, unrepeated, and unrepeatable.”³

This is why Christ had to die. It was a testimony of God’s love, who gave His only Son to die as the only fitting sacrifice for sin. That is why Jesus willingly gave His life as a ransom for many (Mt. 20:28) and was obedient to the point of death, even death on a Cross (Phil. 2:8). He died **“for sins once for all.”**

2. His righteousness

But why did *Christ* have to die? Peter answers this as well in proclaiming that Christ’s death was **“the just for the unjust,”** literally, “just for unjust” as the definite article is not in the Greek and added for clarification. Here Peter sets in stark contrast the moral character of Christ against all others. **“Just”** is singular; **“unjust”** is plural. This is precisely why Christ alone could be a satisfactory substitutionary sacrifice for sins that could appease God’s wrath. He had no guilt of His own to pay for. He kept the entirety of God’s law perfectly. Therefore, He alone could bear our punishment as breakers of God’s law. As sinners, we are incapable of keeping God’s law. But God sent the remedy, Romans 8:3-4, “For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God *did*: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and *as an offering* for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us.” As we saw earlier in 2 Corinthians 5:21, “He made Him who knew no sin *to be sin* on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” Galatians 3:13, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us.” And what was John’s conclusion in 1 John 2:2, “He Himself is the propitiation for our sins.”

The reason that *Christ* had to die is because He and He alone was, as Peter suggested earlier in this letter, “a lamb unblemished and spotless” (1 Pet. 1:19). And so we see that Christ suffered for others—**“for sins”**—and He suffered innocently—**“the just for the unjust.”** His death was in our place.

³ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 77.

Do you believe that this morning? That Christ died for *your* sins? That Christ died in *your* place? Do you believe that His death alone satisfies the penalty for your sins, that penalty being the righteous wrath of God poured out on you for all eternity? If not, then you do not know the sinfulness of your sin in the face of a holy God. That is the second thing Peter refers to by considering...

II. The Purpose for Christ's Suffering

What was the purpose for which Christ died? The phrase “**so that He might bring us to God**” is a clear, concise statement of the great purpose in the once-for-all death of Christ for sinners.⁴ Here we are reminded by Peter of the seriousness of our sin. Our sin separates us from a holy God. “**To bring us to God**” indicates man's greatest need.

Consider what the Scriptures say concerning our sin in relation to God. In Romans Paul says that apart from Christ we are “haters of God” (1:30) and God's “enemies” (5:10). This describes each and every person who has never trusted in the saving merits of Christ's death. One of the marks of sin is that man often thinks more highly of himself than he ought. Many today look at the sins of others as being more sinful than theirs and somehow rationalize that they are not as bad as others. This plea of inherent goodness is a lie from the devil himself. The idea that we are somehow good enough in our own merit to appease God's wrath smacks in the face of all we just considered in Christ's death for sins. If man was somehow good enough, then Christ's death was needless.

A mindset like this does not consider the two great obstacles that stand in the way of a sinner being made right with God. The first obstacle is God Himself in His holiness and justice. As One who is holy, God is utterly pure, totally without any kind of blame or error, absolutely free from sin in every respect. Because He is holy, God is quite different from man who is described as a sinner. Holiness not only conveys what is missing from God, that is, sin, but also what is *in* God. Holiness is a positive characteristic describing the uniqueness of God. In Isaiah's vision he heard the seraphim proclaim, “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of His glory” (Is. 6:3). John described God's holiness as pure light with no mixture of darkness, “And this is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all” (1 Jn. 1:5).

God is also righteous and just. Everything God does is absolutely right and proper. He never makes an assumption or an unjust accusation toward man. His righteousness and justice has its roots in His holiness. Because God is holy, He therefore can only do that which is right. His actions toward mankind are just and righteous. He never carries out any act toward man that is not first rooted in His holy character. His perfection is seen in His acts of righteousness and justice. The Psalmist writes, “God is a righteous judge.... and the heavens declare His righteousness, for God Himself is judge” (Ps. 7:11; 50:6). God's justice is described in Exodus 34:7, “yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished.” God's righteousness and justice demand that He deal with sin and disobedience. For God to overlook such unholy acts would be to negate His righteousness, which is impossible to do.⁵

So the nature of God Himself is the first great obstacle for man to be reconciled to Him. The other is our sins. Everything that is said of God is the exact opposite in man. God is holy; we

⁴ Hiebert, 237.

⁵ I am indebted to Phil Newton for these descriptions of God's holiness and justice. See his booklet, *The Way of Faith*, available at Founders Press or online at <http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/info/follow-jesus.html>.

are unholy because of sin. Whereas John proclaimed that God is light and in Him there is no darkness at all, John proclaims that Christ in taking on flesh came to this earth as Light shining in the darkness, the darkness being the sinful hearts of men, and that they love the dark rather than the Light (Jn. 1:5). That is the nature of our separateness. There is no commixture of Light and darkness. Paul picks up on this theme of sin and darkness in Ephesians 5, claiming that those who live apart from Christ are darkness, not Light (Eph. 5:8).

Further, where God is righteous and just in all His ways, man in his sin is described as unrighteous, again demonstrating the separation that exists between God and man. There is no middle ground. The Scriptures teach that you are either righteous or unrighteous. You have either been reconciled to God through Christ so that He no longer is your enemy, or you remain separated from God in your sins and remain His enemy and He your enemy. If God is for you, who can be against you? The question is, “Is God for you?”

This grasps the meaning of the statement that Christ died “**so that He might bring us to God.**” He alone is capable of reconciling us to God. No priest can do that, only our great High Priest, who offered Himself as a sacrifice for sins and sat down at the right hand of God most high as our Mediator. No pastor or saint or parent can bring us to God, though they might proclaim the way and provide a good example for us to follow. No religious ceremony, like the Lord’s Table, or even church attendance can reconcile us to God, though these are certainly important. No work of ours can bring us to God. Our works are nothing but filthy rags in the sight of a holy God. It is only through faith in Christ’s finished work at the Cross for sins that one can be brought to God. It is at the Cross where God’s wrath and love meet in the person of Christ. That is grace! *Ephesians 2:4-6* – ⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), ⁶ and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly *places* in Christ Jesus. *Romans 5:6* – For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.

That is the purpose for Christ’s suffering. Have you been brought to God through Christ this morning? Do you understand that the righteous judgment of God against sin separates you from fellowship with Him? Do you believe that it is in Christ alone that one can be made right with God? Not Christ plus your works. Not Christ plus anything, but simply in Christ alone? If not, then Scripture proclaims that you are at enmity with God and that you will receive His justice for your sin.

Conclusion

1. Christ has conquered sin. In Christ’s death the penalty for sin was paid and it never has to be paid for again. He has paid my debt; He has paid everything that I owe that I could never pay and He did it in His death upon the cross of Calvary. In Christ there is full pardon for sin, full forgiveness. In Christ the power of sin has been rendered inoperable so that we are no longer in bondage to it. Sin no longer reigns in those who are in Christ. This comes the moment one repents, turns from their sins, and trusts that Christ has died for their sins, turning to Him and His work for them. Have you done that today?

2. Christ has provided access to God. Those who once were unable to enter into the presence of God because of their unrighteousness may now do so. They can bring their prayers and

praises to Him. They can call on Him in their time of need and be confident that He sees the righteous and hears their prayers (3:12). *Hebrews 4:16* – Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

3. To deny Christ is utter foolishness. If the Scriptures are true, and they are, then what we have said this morning is that deny Christ leaves you in your sins and separated from God, justly condemned by Him forever. You are at this very moment under His wrath, but that wrath will be poured out with the full force of His righteous anger upon you for all eternity in hell. There are some present this morning who know this to be true yet continue to bide what they think is their time. But I plead with you to understand that every moment you have on this earth is from the very God who you at this moment are offending and you are not promised another breath. **“For Christ also died for sins once for all, *the just for the unjust*, so that He might bring us to God.”** If you have never trusted Christ as your Lord and Savior, then you are rejecting God’s only provision for your sins. May those words pierce your heart this morning.