

## What Good Can Come From Unjust Suffering?

**January 25, 2015**

Welcome to CrossWinds. It is great to worship together. If you are connecting from the Internet, thanks for joining us. If you are new, I want to welcome you. My name is Kurt. As a church we are studying through the book of 1 Peter. This is a great book and as we get to the end we are studying some challenging, but richly rewarding, sections of the book. Peter taught us how to handle the trials we face in life. No trial grabs our attention more than someone setting themselves up as our enemy to do us evil. People that set themselves up as our enemies. When people lie about us and speak evil about us, it cuts our hearts. Two weeks ago Peter taught us how we treat those enemies.

Rather than returning evil for evil or insult for insult, we bless our enemies. We go out of our ways to do them spiritual and practical good. We are to love our enemies. That sounds totally contrary to everything in our human nature but that is the way Christians must treat our enemies. The reason this is important is because it is the heart of the gospel message.

We were enemies of God. We had done evil to God, yet God blessed us. He sent his own son to die for us and save us from our sin when we didn't deserve any of it. We are to act the same way to our enemies. We are to go out of our ways to bless them, even when they don't deserve it because that is the gospel message. When our enemies ask why we love them and bless them, we use that opportunity to tell them that we bless them as God blessed us. I want to

treat you the same way and do good to you when you are my enemy so you understand the way God loves us.

Sometimes the reason God allows there to be enemies in our lives who do evil against us is because he is giving us a platform to tell them the good news of Jesus, not just with words but with our actions. This week we will see how God can bring about good out of undeserved suffering.

Last week we moved from how to respond when evil and unkindness to how to endure our enemies. Today we look at what possible good can come from unjust suffering?

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they 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. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but 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. 1 Peter 3:18–22 (ESV)

This is a very interesting passage. It is considered to be one of the hardest passages in the Bible to understand. If you read the scholars, there are 180 different interpretations in 2,000 years of church history. While there are different interpretations, I believe we can discard many of them to get to its meaning. While some parts of this passage are obscure, the big message is abundantly clear. Everything in this text is about answering the question, "What possible good can come out of undeserved suffering?"

Peter answered it by saying, "Let me give you an example. Let's look at all the good God did through the undeserved suffering of Jesus." *His argument is that if God had a good purpose for allowing unjust suffering in Jesus' life, you*

*can rest assured that he also has a good purpose for allowing undeserved suffering in your life.*

Let's look at all the good God did with the unjust suffering of Jesus.

**God used Christ's undeserved suffering to pay for our sins and bring us to God.**

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God... 1 Peter 3:18 (ESV)

**Christ understands unjust suffering.**

When we experience unjust suffering, the first thing we feel is that nobody understands. That isn't true. Jesus understands undeserved suffering. Jesus experienced the ultimate in undeserved suffering. He was beaten and whipped to the point he wasn't even recognizable as a human being before he was crucified. He deserved none of it. There was not a single evil word he had spoken. There was not a single evil action he had done. All Jesus had done was bless people, teach people, heal thousands and feed thousands. All Jesus did was good, yet he was whipped and crucified for it. The first thing we need to know when facing undeserved suffering is that Jesus understands what it feels like.

**Christ's suffering was purposeful.**

Jesus suffered as the righteous for the unrighteous. Jesus suffered in our places for our sin to bring us to God. Jesus' unjust suffering had a good purpose. From a strictly time-bound human point of view, Christ's suffering looked purposeless. As Jesus' followers watched him die they couldn't imagine any good was around the corner. From God's perspective, we can now see Jesus'

suffering was purposeful. It wasn't trite suffering. It was suffering to pay for our sin and bring us to God. In the same way, as adopted children of God, we can rest assured that when we face unjust suffering, it may feel purposeless, but from God's perspective, we can say with confidence that God has a good purpose for it. We may not see what God is doing with our suffering in the heat of the moment, but from the vantage point of eternity it will make sense.

### **Christ's suffering was powerful.**

Christ suffered once for sins to bring us to God. Peter showed us the power of Christ's sufferings. Jesus died *once* for all sin. He paid for sin in full. That means the sins of Christians in the 1600s, the sins of Christians in 2014 and the sins of Christians in 2025. He paid for all of sin by enduring one great act of undeserved suffering.

Peter's point is that what God will do in our lives through our unjust suffering is powerful. We may not understand what God is up to until eternity, but rest assured that no wound we experience is wasted. There are powerful redemptive purposes behind our suffering. God's plan may be that others will in heaven because of how we handle unjust suffering. Rest assured, God has a powerful purpose behind what you are going through.

### **God used Christ's undeserved suffering to conquer the fallen spiritual world.**

...being put to death in the flesh but made alive in (by) the spirit (Spirit), in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah... 1 Peter 3:18–20 (ESV)

For most of us, the train just jumped the tracks. What is happening? Who are the spirits in prison? Why did Peter start talking about Noah? What is

happening? At this point the Bible scholars go nuts. This is the section of the passage that has 180 different views in church history. While it is hard to know exactly what it is happening, that doesn't mean I don't have an opinion.

What do you do when you have a tough text like this? The first thing to remember is that context is king. Context determines meaning. We need to remember what Peter was talking about and make sure we understand this as part of the flow of his argument. Roman Catholics find purgatory in here. Peter was not talking about purgatory. Some Christians in church history see a second chance at salvation. Peter was not talking about a second chance at salvation. The majority of the 180 different views of this text are completely foreign to Peter's flow of thought and for that reason I think it is safe to discard them. The first thing we saw about Christ's undeserved suffering is that it took care of our entire sin problem and brought us to God. These verses, which are the next section of that argument must have something to do with the good that was accomplished by Christ's undeserved suffering.

Our text says Jesus was put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit. This is one of the trickiest parts to translate in the Greek. Some people believe that when Christ died he was made alive in the spiritual world and he spiritually preached to spirits in prison. I don't think that is the best translation or the best explanation. If it simply means Jesus was alive spiritually after his death, that is no big deal. The Bible says everybody is alive spiritually after their death. There is no good news.

The Greek doesn't have capitalization for proper nouns. I think the spirit talked about here is the Holy Spirit and it could be translated with a capital "S." This means Christ was resurrected by the power of the Holy Spirit. This a completely viable translation. The good news of Jesus is not just that he died on the cross for our sins but that he rose from the dead. Those are usually the two pieces we find together in the Bible. This is telling us some of the good that happened when Christ rose from the dead.

After Jesus rose from the dead, he went and preached to the spirits in prison. Who were these spirits and where was this prison? The very terminology feels foreign to the Bible. It cannot be spirits that are in hell because the Bible tells us nobody is in hell until the final judgment. What is this referring to?

Apparently there are spirits, fallen angels, or demons that are kept in some type of prison right now. They are not roaming the Earth. God in his grace bound them to hold back their wicked influence upon the Earth. Interestingly, this is what we find in other passages of Scripture.

And the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day. Jude 6 (ESV)

Jude described some kind of angelic rebellion where fallen angels left their proper place, apparently they came to Earth to try to destroy the people on it. God stopped them by binding them in chains to be kept for the final day of judgment.

For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell (Tartus) and committed them to chains (pits) of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment; 2 Peter 2:4 (ESV)

One very important thing we need to notice is the word for *hell* in this verse. I told you earlier that nobody is in hell until final judgment. It appears these demons are in hell right now. I want you to look at the footnote on this word. The word for hell in this verse is not the word hell. It is actually the Greek word Tartus. For many years Tartus was translated as hell but it is actually a different place. Tartus comes from Greek and Roman mythology and is mentioned in Jewish apocalyptic literature. It is a place where the Greeks and Romans believed enemies of God are kept bound. They believed the location of Tartus was in the heart of the Earth. The Greeks and Romans believed it was a holding cell for what we would call demons. What we see in these three verses attest to a place where particularly evil demons are kept bound so they no longer roam the Earth. They are held there by God until final judgment.

The next question is, “When did they roam the earth?” According to what we read in 1 Peter 3, they roamed the Earth in the days of Noah. When we turn to the book of Genesis to read about Noah, look what we find just before the flood.

When man began to multiply on the face of the land and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive. And they took as their wives any they chose. Then the Lord said, “My Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years.” The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of man and they bore children to them. These were the mighty men who were of old, the men of renown. The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, “I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them.” But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord. Genesis 6:1–8 (ESV)

We have undefined spiritual beings that are not human roaming the earth. They were called “the sons of God” and they were doing things they shouldn’t. They were taking human wives and having children with them. The Bible doesn’t give us all the details of what was happening. Some scholars think these powerful evil beings had physical male bodies and they were taking human women to conceive children so they could create a hybrid demonic human race that would be unredeemable. Some think they were demons that so strongly possessed human men that they literally controlled them and their children would be like little demons. We don’t know the details on this. We can only speculate of the fine details.

We do know their influence on the earth was so bad that the thought of every man’s heart was now evil all the time. The entire human race was now so evil that God decided to bring the flood and wipe out the entire earth, except for Noah and his family. In the flood these evil demons were apparently bound by God and put in this holding place called either the prison, the pit or Tartus. Thankfully they are no longer roaming the earth to be such an evil influence on humanity, but they are in God’s prison awaiting their final judgment. If that wasn’t so, the earth would be just as wicked as before the flood with their influence around.

Just so you know, God’s decision to flood the earth and destroy everything wasn’t a rash decision. The Bible tells us that for years God had Noah begging people to repent of their sin.



...if he did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven others, when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; 2 Peter 2:5 (ESV)

As Noah built the ark, people mocked him for building a boat where there was no water. Noah kept warning people about the flood and pleading with them to repent but after 120 years of boat building nobody listened. Finally God said, “Enough is enough. The ark is done. Noah, get inside with the animals. I will shut the door and my judgment will fall.”

In the same way Peter was encouraging these Christians who were suffering unjustly in an unholy world to be like Noah. Keep telling people to repent. Keep living a righteous life even though other people are persecuting you for it. Some who are persecuting you may even be demonically inspired to persecute you, just like Noah experienced in his day. Just remember, God’s judgment will come.

There is another layer to this story. One of the things I love to do is research the history and culture of the ancient world to better understand what the Bible meant to the ancient people who read it. The historical background of this section is particularly interesting.

Apparently Noah was a popular guy in Asia Minor. In that part of the world four slightly different versions of the flood story circulated in pagan culture. There was even a town in the area that had the Greek word for *ark* as part of its name. It was believed the ark of Noah came to rest on one of the nearby mountains. The Roman emperor even minted an entire series of coins with a drawing of Noah and his wife on one side and the Roman emperor’s face on the other.

Noah was well known in their culture, like Christopher Columbus is known in our culture. Peter talked about Noah and God's judgment for sin because everybody understood that, even if you weren't familiar with the Bible.

A second interesting piece of cultural background comes from studying the books people read in this part of the world. There was a book in the ancient world that was not part of the Bible, but it was popular reading. It is called the book of 1 Enoch. It is like an ancient version of a Dan Brown novel. 1 Enoch has some biblical facts mixed with a bunch of fiction. Guess what part of the Bible 1 Enoch pulls its information from? Genesis 6. 1 Enoch is a fictional story about the mysterious "sons of God" beings talked about in Genesis 6 and how they interacted with Noah. In 1 Enoch they are called "the watchers". They follow the biblical story line of being powerful fallen angels that are extremely evil. They come to earth to sleep with human women and produce children who are extremely evil giants.

Incidentally, if you saw the Russell Crow movie Noah you need to know the movie uses the book of 1 Enoch as part of the Noah story. In the movie, the watchers are powerful spiritual beings that are heroes who help Noah. In 1 Enoch, the watchers are the villains that should be destroyed. In the book of 1 Enoch the watchers are infesting the earth and trying to destroy the human race and *they are bound for all eternity in prison awaiting final judgment by God.*



That is the same terminology used in 1 Peter 3.

This is interesting stuff. Peter used the terminology of 1 Enoch and the spiritual prison to describe the Biblical truth of the binding of powerful fallen demons.

You may wonder how this applies to us and fits into Peter's argument. Peter brought up something everybody in his audience understood, Noah and the binding of powerful demonic in a prison, to make a point. Jesus' unjust suffering didn't just conquer sin but it conquered the entire unseen spiritual world that is in rebellion against God. Every fallen spiritual being, even the super powerful ones that ruined humanity before the flood, were conquered by Jesus' undeserved suffering. When he rose from the grave he went to their prison and proclaimed ultimate victory for a portion of the human race to the very demons who tried to destroy the human race.

This is why Peter closed by saying:

...who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him. 1 Peter 3:22 (ESV)

We understand the identity of angels. Who are the *authorities* and *powers*? In Jewish rabbinic literature, the terms *authorities* and *powers* are the titles of powerful high-ranking angels. Jesus' undeserved suffering didn't just pay for the sin that separated us from God but it beat every single spiritual being that seeks to separate us from God, even the super powerful ones that roamed the earth before the flood.

This truth is not unique to Peter. Paul said the same thing and made the same argument.

And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities (demonic rulers and authorities) and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him. Colossians 2:13–15 (ESV)

This is the same thing Peter said. There is immense good that God did through the unjust suffering of Jesus.

One of the questions that comes to mind is how can we participate in Christ's incredible victory from his undeserved suffering? Peter, being a good pastor, gave us the answer.

**An appeal to God for a good conscience through Christ, which is seen in baptism, is the ark that carries me through God's final judgment.**

Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ... 1 Peter 3:21 (ESV)

In the ancient world, when people believed, they were baptized. They didn't have altar calls. If you repented of your sin and trusted in God to save you from your sin, you were baptized. That was your public proclamation of trusting in Christ. That is the way it should be today. It is not baptism that saves you. It is the appeal to God for a good conscience through Jesus that saves us from our sin. That appeal to God through Jesus is the ark that carries us through God's final judgment. Peter saw a parallel between the ark carrying God's people through the first judgment and trust in Christ, which is pictured through baptism, carrying God's people through God's final judgment.

This morning, if you haven't trusted in Jesus to save you from God's final judgment, today is the day. Now is the time. If you haven't had a chance to be

baptized and go public with your trust in Jesus to carry you through the final judgment, talk to me after the service.

**Since Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking about suffering in the flesh.**

Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking... 1 Peter 4:1 (ESV)

When we face undeserved suffering, especially because we are following Jesus, don't lose hope. Be confident that God has a good purpose behind the unjust suffering. It is not purposeless suffering; just like Jesus, it is purposeful suffering. It is not useless suffering but it is powerful suffering. We may not understand why God is allowing us to suffer unjustly until eternity but when we get there we will understand. We will admit that God is good and that he blessed our lives.

Even though we may be oppressed by evil forces that are behind the unjust suffering we experience, rest assured that every demon was conquered by Jesus. Jesus proclaimed his victory over them when he rose from the grave and right now he is sitting in triumph over all of them at the right hand of the father.

My friends, as a child of God, you can be confident God will do good through the unjust suffering in your life, just like he did through the unjust suffering in Jesus' life.

Let's pray.



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