

1 Peter 3:8-4:6: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] 1 Peter 3.8-4.6 Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind.

Do not repay evil for evil, or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless. For to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing. For whoever desires to love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil, and his lips from speaking deceit.

Let him turn away from evil and do good. Let him seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.

Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.

Yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that when you are slandered, those who revile your good behaviour in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.

[1 : 1 7] 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.

Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh, no longer for human passions, but for the will of God.

For the time that has passed suffices for doing what Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties and lawless idolatry. With respect to this, they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you, but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.

For this is why the gospel was preached even to them who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does. 1 Peter chapter 3 verses 8 to 12 concludes the section of instructions that began in chapter 2 verse 11.

[2 : 5 6] It presents six characteristics of faithful Christians. Unity of mind is a common theme within the New Testament.

If we have the mind of Christ, we will be united, and we won't be constantly at odds with each other. We are called to have sympathy or compassion, entering into other people's joys and sorrows, weeping with those who weep and rejoicing with those who rejoice.

We must have love for brothers and sisters in Christ. Throughout the New Testament, this is one of the defining characteristics of the people of Christ. We must have hearts that are tender, kind, open to being moved.

Our hearts must not be closed to people, they must not be calloused. Christians must have humble minds, meekness, concern for others before ourselves, not thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought, a sense of the greatness of God and the needs of our neighbours, and a sense of how small we are in the light of God's greatness.

This should inform all of our thinking. In the activity of our minds, we can often be puffed up and proud. But yet, true wisdom is found in the fear of the Lord. It begins with this posture of humility, and it never ceases to be characterised by this.

[4 : 11] We must have a posture of blessing towards others. We've been called to obtain a blessing. And as Christians, we participate in the giving of what we receive in the Gospel.

We are forgiven, so we forgive. We have been blessed, so we bless. We have been given the Spirit as the people of God, so we minister the Spirit to others. And to solidify this point, he quotes at length from Psalm 34.

As Charles Cranfield notes, Peter has rephrased the quotation to accent its reference to the age to come. The life that the psalmist, as quoted by Peter, desires to love is not so much the life of the present day, but the life to come.

And blessedness, which we await from the Lord, comes to those who follow the instructions of the psalmist. And verse 13 continues the thought of the quotation from Psalm 34. It could be translated, This follows on from verse 12.

But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil. If we are zealous for what is good, and wholehearted in our pursuit of it, no evil can ultimately harm us, no matter how fiercely it might assail us.

[5 : 21] This is similar to Paul's point that he makes in Romans chapter 8, verses 31 to 39. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?

He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all? How will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies, who is to condemn.

Christ Jesus is the one who died. More than that, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us, who shall separate us from the love of Christ, shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?

As it is written, For your sake we are being killed all the day long. We are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered. No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

[6 : 28] Indeed, in addition to the fact that no suffering will ultimately harm us, we are promised that if we suffer for righteousness' sake, we will be blessed. Here he takes up the point of Jesus in Matthew chapter 5 verses 10 to 12 at the end of the Beatitudes.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you, and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. He charges his hearers, Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy.

This is taken from Isaiah chapter 8 verses 11 to 13. For the Lord spoke thus to me with his strong hand upon me, and warned me not to walk in the way of this people, saying, Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread.

But the Lord of hosts, him you shall honour as holy, let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. These are the verses that immediately precede those concerning the stumbling stone, which he has already alluded to in the preceding chapter.

[7 : 40] We should also note that Christ the Lord fills the place where the Lord of hosts was, in the original quotation. Such uses of Old Testament texts in the New Testament is an important line of evidence for the deity of Christ.

The New Testament authors were prepared to take Old Testament scriptures that were clearly about God himself, and use them to refer to Christ. Christians are charged to give an answer for their hope.

Maybe this is an actual trial in the case of persecutions, or just when we are questioned by our neighbours and others around us. We must think diligently, so as to be able to answer such questions well when we are put on the spot.

And we must do so with gentleness and respect. These themes have been central throughout. These are characteristic of the way that Christians relate to their neighbours. We also act with a good conscience.

We maintain blameless and exemplary lives. We are transparent in our godliness. We aren't driven by fear, resentment or anger, as Cranfield argues, but by integrity.

[8 : 40] Over time, this can put false accusers to shame. Once again, as he did when he spoke to slaves about their suffering, he speaks of the goodness of suffering for doing good. As he says in chapter 2, verses 19 to 20, And from here, as he did previously, he moves into the example of Christ's sufferings of the righteous one suffering unjustly.

Christ's suffering should be our model. The suffering of Christ, however, is redemptive. It brings us to God. It opens up a new and living way and removes the obstacle of sin.

Christ was put to death in the flesh. He took the Adamic, weak flesh that was under judgment, and bore the judgment that lay upon it. But he was made alive in the Spirit, in the resurrection.

Peter's distinction between flesh and spirit is much the same as Paul's is. The verses that follow are some of the most debated in the whole of Peter's writings. Who are the spirits in prison?

What does it mean that Christ proclaims to them? Various theories have been put forth. Some talk about people being in spiritual bondage. Others have seen here the doctrine of Christ's descent into hell.

[10 : 03] Others still have seen a reference back to Genesis chapter 6, and the angelic sons of God who took human women and had relations with them. This story was narrated in more detail in the apocalyptic intertestamental text, the book of Enoch.

It seems to me that this event is also referred to in 2 Peter chapter 2 verses 4-5. For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment, 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.

And then also in Jude verse 6, Considering that the spirits are associated with the time of the building of the ark, considering the use of the term spirits, and considering references to this narrative elsewhere in the New Testament, and particularly within the writing of Peter, it seems most likely to me that this is a reference back to Genesis chapter 6 and the stories surrounding it.

What then does it mean that Christ preached to the spirits in prison? And when does that take place? Their disobedience took place in the days of Noah, but it seems to me that Christ preaching to them occurred in the spirit during the period between his death and his resurrection, or perhaps some might argue after his resurrection and ascension.

The preaching in question is Christ's declaration of his victory over them. It is not a preaching that can lead to salvation. It is rather a preaching that seals their defeat. Reading passages like this in Revelation chapter 12 verses 7 to 12, we should remember the cosmic dimensions of the work of Christ.

[11 : 52] Christ is defeating the rebellious angels, and he is reordering the heavenly realms. During the time of the rebellion of these angels, prior to the flood, God's patience waited, and the ark was prepared, but only a few, a remnant of eight people, were brought safely through the waters.

Peter makes a remarkable comparison of this with baptism. Just as Noah and his family were delivered through the waters of the flood, so Christians are delivered through the waters of baptism.

The waters of the flood drowned the old world, and the enemies of the people of God, and the waters of baptism symbolically drowned the old world, and all the devils that pursue us.

It is an exceedingly strong claim to say that baptism saves us. What might Peter mean? Some have tried to empty this statement of its force, but while Peter is concerned to say how baptism saves us, he does not make the statement only to empty it.

For Peter, it seems, the rite of baptism is truly saving. He makes clear what he does not mean by this. It does not save as a removal of dirt from the body. It is not just a physical rite that works in a magical way, as if you could wash your flesh in the waters of baptism and instantly be saved.

[13 : 04] That is not how baptism works. Baptism's efficacy does not reside in mere water. Rather, baptism saves as the answer of a good conscience towards God, and its efficacy comes through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The efficacy of baptism is like the efficacy of a wedding ceremony for a loving union between a man and his wife. While a baptism or a wedding ceremony can create a formal relationship, the true efficacy of such ceremonies depends upon a wholehearted self-rendering over time, as we faithfully live out the meaning of what we have been committed to in the ceremony itself.

In the case of baptism, we are baptised into Christ. We are baptised into his death, buried with him, in order that we might be raised with him on the last day. That event of burial with Christ in baptism is a marking out of our bodies for that future event of resurrection.

Baptism suspends us between the event in the past, the death of Christ, and the event in the future, the resurrection of our bodies that we anticipate. And the efficacy of baptism is the efficacy of resurrection itself.

That's where baptism gets its power, from the future in which it will be confirmed by God raising us from the dead. This Jesus Christ, who was raised from the dead, has gone into heaven.

[14 : 20] He has triumphed and been exalted over all angels' authorities and powers, which are now subject to him. He will reign until all things have been put under his feet, as Psalm 110 verse 1 declares.

Whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh, no longer for human passions, but for the will of God. Although people's former way of life might have been characterised by a pursuit of their passions, now that they have taken on the mantle of Christ, they follow a very different course.

In the before time, they had all the time that they wanted for living as the Gentiles do, for sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry.

They will have to give an account to the one who will judge the living and the dead. Verse 6 is another difficult verse to understand, for this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does.

Even though they have suffered the consequences of death in the flesh the way that people more generally do, they might live in the spirit the way that God does, and they will be raised on the last day.

[16 : 44] Here, as Paul does in chapter 4 of 1 Thessalonians, Peter wants to assure his hearers that those who have died in Christ, who have heard the gospel and responded to it, will also live in the spirit with them.

The story of Noah and the ark and the flood more generally is referred to on a number of occasions in the New Testament as a paradigmatic example of judgment. What are some of the other occasions when it is used as an example, and what lessons can we learn from it for understanding the judgment of God?

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