

22, 1 Peter chapter 3, verses 18 through 22. Well, right out of seminary, I was interviewing for a church, and they asked me in the interview process, what would be the hardest text to preach in the New Testament? And I said, 1 Peter chapter 3, verses 18 through 22. So we come obviously to a notoriously difficult text this morning, but I really do believe, I really do believe that if we can, especially through a couple of the verses, slow down, we can come to real clarity on what is being said, and that it's very good for us to understand what he's saying.

Well, you need a Jesus who is like you, but you also need a Jesus who is infinitely unlike you. You need a Jesus who enters into your suffering, but you also need a Jesus who infinitely transcends your suffering. You need a Jesus who is God in all of his omnipotence and glory, and you need a Jesus who is man in all of his suffering and in all of his sorrow. You need a Jesus who's exalted, infinitely exalted, but you also need a Jesus who is low. Jesus who is infinitely low. You need a Jesus who knows your tears but can also wipe your tears with omnipotent compassion.

Why do I say all this this morning? Because today Peter sets forth the whole Christ for his readers, for those who originally read this letter into you this morning. He sets forth the whole Christ. He knows that those to whom he is writing are being persecuted in their suffering. And so he wants to set forth for them this glorious Christ in the midst of their sincere persecution and suffering that they might endure knowing that he understands and also knowing that he is God and he is able to help them.

With this in mind, let us pray before we read the portion of God's word this morning. Father, we come to a text where we, as in every text, need not to rely on our supposed ideas, but the very God who has given us this word. We come relying upon you to grant us grace to understand it and to even be built up in love, in Christ, and obedience to him through this which you have told us in 1 Peter 3, verses 18 through 22. Send forth your spirit, we pray in Christ's name, amen.

Hear now the word of God, 1 Peter 3, beginning in verse 18. 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."

Well, this ends the reading of God's holy word. May he bless now the reading and proclamation of it to our lives.

Well, you don't need a half Christ here this morning. You need a whole Christ, a half Christ, a three-fourths Christ, a four-fifths Christ, will simply leave you entirely lost. You need the whole Christ of the Bible, and that is what you see in this text. You see the whole Christ. You want a Christ, yes, a Christ who can come to you and sympathize with you, but you want a Christ who rules over you with power, who is glorious, who is altogether awesome. who knows your suffering but can do something for you in the midst of your suffering. You want a Christ who on your deathbed can sympathize with you, but can also help you. And that's the Christ that the Apostle Peter by divine inspiration is setting forth. This is the Christ of Holy Scripture. So this morning, I want us to consider the whole Christ. We're going to do this with three points. The whole Christ. Christ our justification, our proclamation, and our exaltation.

Justification, proclamation, and exaltation. Those are what we see in this text. Christ as our justification, our proclamation, and our exaltation.

So first this morning, Christ our justification. We see this in verse 18. Now the most important question in the entire world is this. How can I, a sinner, stand before a holy God? That is the most important question that you can answer in the entire world. Now you sitting here this morning might not think that's the most important question in your life. You might be tempted to think that the most important question in your life is, how am I going to pay the bills? Am I going to pass the test? Can my team win the football game? You might think that these are the most important questions in life, or even somewhat more serious questions. Am I going to be able to survive this cancer diagnosis? That's a really important question. That's not a small question. But is that the most important question? And I answer, absolutely not. It is not the most important question in your life.

The most important question in your life is this, how can I, a sinner, stand before a holy God? That is the most important question. Why is the most important question? We could list a whole host of reasons. But if we could just sit, this one alone is reason to make you know it's the most important question. Questions like, am I going to be able to pay the bills, aren't going to matter when you're dead. Questions like, am I going to pass the test, these don't matter. But I'm simply stating, they won't matter when you're dead. You're not going to be worried about whether or not you pass that test when you're dead. This is an eternal question. This is the question that if you cannot get right today in your soul, will be to your condemnation for ages without end after you have passed. This is the most important question in the world. How can I, a sinner, stand before a holy God?

And verse 18 answers this question. And it says it's by Christ alone you must be justified, for Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous. This is the doctrine of justification. How can you be declared righteous? How can you stand before the holy and just God and not be condemned if you have sinned even one time? Even one time, the scriptures teach. You deserve the condemnation of God. One perverted thought and you're judged eternally. How, how, how can he ever accept you into his presence? And this verse gives you the answer. It's Christ. Christ is the only one in whom you can find the right answer to this question. He says here, Christ suffered once for sins. I want us to think for a moment about this word, once. What's the significance of once? Well, our sins deserve God's infinite wrath. That is why, that is why when someone dies and is not trusting in Christ, Their judgment is not temporal. It is forever. It is eternal because it's deserving of an infinite punishment. And what this verse is saying is that Christ dealt with that infinite penalty that you deserve in his once offering up of himself. a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice, that in his once offering himself up, in one event on that cross, he took away all of the penalty of your sins, not an ounce, not a millimeter, not the smallest stain remains. He took the entire penalty on himself in his once suffering.

But you have to ask the question, if you're a thinking person, if my sins deserve the infinite punishment of God, how can He once atone for all of my sins? In one instant, in a temporal duration of time, how can He take them all on Himself? If I die and I'm not in Him, I suffer eternally, forever and ever and ever. How can He take them all on Himself then? in a finite amount of time if it deserves an infinite punishment? How can the infinite be put into a finite amount of time? How could he ever do that?

And that's where the great quote comes in. His infinite nature gave to his finite suffering infinite value. It's because Christ is God, you see. That's how, because the infiniteness of his nature gave to the finiteness of his sufferings an

infinite value so that all of your sins, every one of them, the worst ones, the very darkest ones, the ones no one knows about, those sins can be completely done with. He did it all once in his offering up of himself.

This incredible word once is powerful. This week, you will, this very week, you will be attacked by the evil one. His minions, or he himself, will throw his fiery darts at you this very week. Your own very flesh, this very week, even for the believer here, your very flesh, even as a Christian, it will fight against you. You will war this very week. You will say to yourself this very week, Why do I even try? Why do I even continue to try to pretend I'm a Christian? I'm such a failure. I'm the most wicked, pathetic person in the world. I should just give up. You're gonna have those thoughts this week. You're gonna battle against the evil one this week. You're gonna feel the sense of your sins this week.

And Satan wants to destroy you, even though he cannot. I'm talking about the real believer here this morning. I'm not talking about the unbeliever who might be here. I'm talking to the Christian here this morning. You will battle sin this week. And I want to just tell you, if you can do this one thing by God's grace, and it will be God's grace, but if you can remember in your heart one word, it could bring you great comfort. Once.

Can you remember once this week? Can you remember? You can say to Satan, you can say to your flesh, I am all those things, Satan. I am all those things. I am a terrible person. I have fallen short. I have sinned against my God. But once, once, Satan, one time, he took my sins upon himself, and there is not one that remains. I am safe. I am secure. You can do nothing to me, Satan. And flesh, you cannot destroy me. Because one time, he did it all. He did it all for me, one time. He did it all.

What comfort could you glean from that one word? This week, my friends, my beloved brethren and sisters in Christ, you could take great comfort. Once, he did it all. But not only did he take on your sin, according to verse 18, he also, in justification, you're declared positively righteous. So he takes your sin, but you're also declared righteous. Look again. The righteous for the unrighteous. The righteous one dies for the unrighteous one. This is essential to justification. Justification is not just that you are declared not guilty. It is positively that you are declared righteous. And because you are declared righteous, because you are clothed in Christ's righteousness, because he has taken on all of your sins, it's not only this morning, for the believer, it is not only that God will not condemn you, it is positively that he cannot condemn you. God cannot condemn you this morning if you're in Christ. It's not just that he won't do it, it's that he can't do it.

Why can't he condemn you? Because didn't we already learn that he's a just God? If Christ has once taken your sins on himself, if he has fulfilled righteousness for you, Can God punish you for the sins which he has already punished on the cross in Christ? He would not be just any longer because he would be punishing Christ on the cross for your crimes and then he would be punishing you a second time for the very same crimes that he already punished Christ for. He cannot condemn you if you're in Christ. It's not just that he will not do it, he cannot condemn you. You're declared righteous in his sight.

And the end goal of all of this, this justification, this glorious doctrine, is union and communion with God. being put to death in the, oh, sorry, unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, that he might bring us to God. That is the goal, that is the end. You see, justification isn't just a doctrine that you can say, whew, I'm glad that doctrine's true, because now I don't go to hell. Now, that is true, and you should not downplay the gloriousness of what I just said. That is true. I am in Christ. I will not be condemned to hell. That is incredible. That is amazing. But it's more than

that. The end, the goal, the telos of justification is union and communion with God himself. It is that you get to be with God forever. That's what you want. That's what you get in justification in Christ. You're brought to God. And you don't bring yourself to God. Look what the text says. He brings you to God. He does it. He takes you all the way home to glory so that you might dwell with your great and awesome God.

Well now let us move on to our second point this morning, Christ our proclamation. So we've seen Christ our justification, now Christ our proclamation. Now when we come now to verses 19 and 20, where we see Christ our proclamation, we are gonna need to slow down. And we are gonna need to dig in. Because there's just simply no way we can try to understand these verses without a little bit of patience. And so when we come to these verses, Let me tell you at the outset where we're going. And then let's go back and let's see how we got there. So I'm going to tell you this is where we're headed. Destination, Christ preached through Noah in Noah's day. That's what the text really means. Christ preached through Noah in Noah's day. Christ preached through Noah in Noah's day. That's what verses 19 and 20 mean.

Now, let us see if you believe that that's what the text means. I wholeheartedly do believe that. If you come to a different interpretation, we have to acknowledge some level of humility here. But I feel very confident that it really is simply saying Christ preached through Noah in Noah's day. So let us see how we get here. Well, first, If you're going to understand this text rightly, you have to understand rightly the last word of verse 18. What's the last word of verse 18? Spirit. Okay, spirit there could either be uppercase or lowercase. Why could it be uppercase or lowercase? Because in the Greek, they didn't use uppercase and lowercase like you and I do to make distinction. So it's a judgment call on the translators. Is it spirit as in, Are souls or spirits, or is it spirit as in the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity? Well, I wholeheartedly believe that it ought to be capitalized. And I'm not alone in that. Actually, the vast majority of commentaries, pull one off your shelf, they will tell you that it should be capitalized. Most of the vast majority of them will, really the good ones will. And it's always seemed to me that it should be capitalized. Why?

How can we say that it ought to be a capital spirit referring to the Holy Spirit? Is there evidence in scripture of this sort of thing? Well, notice in verse 18, there's a contrast between Jesus's flesh to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit. So there's a contrast being made in verse 18 between Jesus in his flesh, in his humility, and in the spirit, in his exaltation. There's a contrast being made here between his death in his resurrection. And let us turn just momentarily to Romans chapter one. Romans chapter one, you see this same contrast between Jesus in his flesh and Jesus in his, in the spirit, in the exaltation. So look at Romans chapter one, verses three and four, same contrast between flesh and spirit and nobody here for the record thinks that spirit should be lowercase in Romans 1, 3, and 4, which we're about to read. Everybody acknowledges it's the Holy Spirit. So Romans 1, 3, and 4. So there you have that contrast between flesh and spirit. It's obviously the Holy Spirit. the same sort of thing is going on in verse 18.

Now, why is this significant? Because what happens when you come to verse 19 is this. He is saying, in that same spirit, the Holy Spirit, Christ went and preached to people in Noah's day. So look at verse 19. In which, that is in the Holy Spirit, He, that is Christ, went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, and as he goes on to explain, in Noah's day. So, that's what he's telling us here.

Now, somebody might object and say, I don't understand how Christ could have gone and preached through the spirit in Noah's day, because, well, Christ didn't come onto the earth until far later in time, and that is true in his

incarnate state. But what has Peter already told you about all true prophets in the Old Testament? Back in chapter 1, verses 10 and 11, what did he tell you? When the prophets preached, the true prophets preached, chapter 1, verses 10 and 11, it was the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ, who spoke through them. Christ was preaching through all the Old Testament prophets. He's already told you that, and that one is very clear. Nobody is confused about what chapter one, verses 10 and 11 means. It's very obvious that he's saying the spirit of Christ preached through the prophets.

Well, was Noah a preacher? Was Noah a prophet? He was. Well, where do you get that? Second Peter, chapter two, verse five, where he is called a herald of righteousness. A herald of righteousness. He was a herald or proclaimer of righteousness in his day, 2 Peter 2, verse five. This is a lot of buildup, I understand that. But there's just no way we can really come with any competence to the right interpretation of this text without this sort of a methodical working through it. So what does all this mean when you put it together? All this means is that Christ preached through his spirit through Noah in Noah's day. Just as we learn in Ephesians 2.17 that Christ preached through Paul in Ephesus, even though Christ never went to Ephesus, so we learn here that Christ preached through Noah in Noah's day.

But how did the people respond to this preaching? Well, it says they are called spirits in prison in verse 19. Now this is a reference to hell. Now to be clear, Peter is not saying that the spirits were in hell when Christ preached to them through Noah in Noah's day. He's not saying that when Noah was proclaiming to them in his lifetime, they at that time were already in hell. What he is saying is, from our perspective, they are spirits in prison. From the writer's perspective, from Peter's perspective, they are now in hell. The spirits that are now in hell, Christ preached to through Noah in his day.

So for example, I know many of y'all like the NASB, the New American Standard Version. While this word actually is not in the original language, The NASB does really helpfully capture what verse 19 is saying. The NASB translates it like this. In which he also went and made proclamation to the spirits, NASB adds, now in prison. The spirits at this time, from my perspective, that are in hell.

So as one author puts it, to sum it all up, what he is saying is this when it says he preached to the spirits in prison. He means this, he preached to those who are now spirits in hell, but who at the time of the preaching were human beings living on the earth.

That's a lot. Why did we spend all this time trying to figure out what in the world verses 19 and 20 mean? Why did Peter think, I'm gonna put this in the letter right here. Now we know he's writing by divine inspiration, but why? Why does he even make this point at all? What's he doing?

Well, remember he's writing to Christians who are being persecuted. are suffering and they're being persecuted for what reason? Because they're living for the Lord. They're proclaiming Christ. They're proclaiming the gospel and they're being persecuted for it. They're suffering for it. Well, what a better, and how are people responding? Perhaps many of them are not repenting.

What a better, is there a better example of that other than Jesus who he's already talked about? Then Noah, Noah, day after day, week after week, year after year, he's building the ark and he's preaching to them, 2 Peter 2, 5. He's proclaiming to them the righteousness of God and nobody's repenting. And you know what he kept doing? He kept building the ark and he kept preaching and people kept not repenting.

And he's trying to say to them, Noah was right. He endured the suffering as he proclaimed the word and he didn't give up. And that's what you need to do too, he's saying. You need to remember what Noah did and you need to go do likewise. And that's what he's saying to you here this morning. We need to remember Noah, that he kept proclaiming, he kept preaching, he didn't deviate, he kept the faith, he fought the good fight, he finished the race.

So you this morning, you're preaching, you're proclaiming, you're living for Christ. before your family member who's not a Christian. You're living for Christ around your friends who don't know Jesus. You're living for Christ. You're proclaiming Christ. You're doing the best you can. And you think to yourself, I might as well just give up. Because this is a waste. They're not repenting. They don't care. I am more concerned about their souls than they are. I am heartbroken over the fact that they are going to perish. It wrecks my soul, and I'm pouring myself out, and they don't care. Why do I even do it?

And he's saying, you do it because that's what God has called you to do. You do it to be faithful. You do it because look, that's what Noah did. So that's the encouragement. That's why he even brings up this. Christ is our proclamation, even in our persecution.

Well, first, third point this morning, Christ, our exaltation, verses 21 and 22. We go from really difficult to slightly less difficult in verses 21 and 22. So bear with me.

Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Verse 21. So he says, baptism, which now corresponds to this. What is the this to which baptism corresponds? Peter is saying that baptism, in part, symbolizes deliverance. Baptism, in part, symbolizes deliverance, as did the floodwaters that were used to bring judgment, but also to bring deliverance for God's people. So he's saying, in part, just like the waters in the flood symbolize judgment and deliverance for God's people who are on the boat, so it symbolizes, baptism symbolizes deliverance as well.

But did being on that ark provide automatically soul deliverance. Did every single person on the ark automatically receive eternal life? They were delivered from the floodwaters temporally, but were they all delivered from God's eternal judgment? Well, no. Noah's son, you might remember, Ham, in Genesis 9 and 10, continues the seed of the serpent. He did receive temporal deliverance on the ark, But he did not receive eternal deliverance because he got on that ark. It didn't automatically save his soul, is simply the point. The ark was meant to point them all to the promised Messiah to come. The ark was meant to point them to the one who could deliver not just their bodies from rainwater, but their souls from the rain of God's wrath. That's what the ark was meant to point them to.

And the same is true of baptism. Baptism has never saved a single person in and of itself. Baptism is meant to point you to the one who can and does save you, the Lord Jesus Christ. Baptism says to the recipient, you cannot

save yourself. Baptism says to the recipient, you need to be washed. You need to be cleansed, not just of physical dirt, but of your very soul needs cleansing. And baptism says, You need that cleansing, and you find that cleansing only in the Lord Jesus Christ. It tells you to look to Christ, and Peter understood that. Peter knew that. You know that Peter knew that.

Because first of all, he goes right on to say it, not as a removal of dirt from the body. So it's clear that something like baptismal regeneration is heretical. It's completely contrary to Christ. There are people who think that the baptism saves in and of itself. It can't. Christ alone can save. There is salvation in no one else.

But also, you know Peter knew that because of Acts chapter eight, which in God's providence we have for the scripture reading this night. Philip has just baptized Simon Magus in Acts 8. He baptizes Simon Magus with water, as he should have. It was the right thing to do. He baptizes Simon Magus. Simon Magus makes a profession of faith. Philip baptizes him. A few verses later, Peter shows up. What does Peter say to him? Well, let me tell you, your heart is not right before God. Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours and pray to the Lord that if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. In other words, you've not understood what your baptism was about, Simon Magus. You've not repented of your sins. You've not truly turned to Christ. And so he calls him to true faith and repentance.

The baptism of Simon Magus did not save him. So that's all he is saying here is that baptism should point you to Christ, the one alone who can save you. So where are you looking here this morning? Where are you today looking for your salvation? Are you looking to your upbringing? Are you looking to your baptism? Are you looking to your church membership? Those are all good things. Those are all things for which you should be thankful. Baptism is a good thing. Church membership's a good thing. But these things cannot save you. Only Christ can save you.

And he goes on to drive this home by pointing to the need of a good conscience. Verse 21, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. How can you have a good conscience? How can you have a good conscience before Almighty God? How can you be persuaded here this morning that your conscience is actually good before God? Well, the good conscience before God comes through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, verse 21. In other words, it comes from union with Christ. A good conscience does not come from believing that you don't have any sin. That's called a deceived conscience. It's called being self-deceived. That's not a good conscience. A good conscience is one, ultimately, that knows I am united to Christ, that before the Almighty, my conscience is good because my Savior is good to whom I am united. If you're going to have a good conscience before the good God, you have to be united to the good Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, and that is what he is saying.

And this all leads to this glorious truth that your Savior is a victorious Savior. You're united to not just the Savior who died, verse 18, not just the Savior who declares you righteous, verse 18, but you're united to the very Jesus, the very Christ who has ascended into glory 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. The Christ in whom the believer is united is the whole Christ. Do you see that? The whole Christ, the Christ who died, the Christ who succeeded in achieving righteousness, and the Christ who now is seated victoriously in exaltation and glory.

And so why, again, think for a moment about the readers originally who would have heard this. Why would he want them to hear this and their persecution? Because they're being persecuted. And he wants them to know that though they are persecuted, they are actually victorious. They are victorious. They are exalted. They are triumphant because they're united to this Christ under whom all things visible and invisible in this world and the next subject. And so that's why he brings all this up about his exaltation here. It's to comfort them in their suffering.

So as we draw our time to a close this morning, I simply want to remind you of this context. These were serious Christians to whom he was writing. They were so serious that they were being persecuted for their faith. They weren't laissez-faire, you know, hands-off, I'm not gonna take my walk with the Lord serious kind of people. These were serious Christians. And what did they need? These very serious Christians needed to ponder anew and afresh the entire Christ of the Bible. They needed to be freshly reminded of Christ in his death, in his righteousness. They need to be freshly reminded of the call to proclaim him, to be living for him, to be a living sacrifice even though they were clearly striving to do just that. And they needed to be reminded that their Christ is victorious and they are victorious in their Christ.

And so this morning, you're a serious Christian and you're perhaps seriously suffering. Well, you need this Christ. Again, let me remind you, if you were there at the prayer meeting last week, Jamie exhorted us very helpfully to Never tire of Christ, that he would always be fresh to us, that he would always be new to us. And that's essentially what Peter is saying here. You need the whole Christ. Everything about him, you need him. And he should never be someone where you say, well, I needed that years ago, but I'm good now. No, he should always be good to you. He should always be fresh to you.

Well, if you don't know this Christ here this morning, I call you to come to him because he is good. And you might be persecuted as a result, but you will also be victorious because your Christ reigns.

Let us pray.

Dear Heavenly Father, we come before you this morning and we're thankful for texts that cause us to slow down and to dig deep and to try to wrestle more intentionally perhaps than we sometimes do with what is God saying in this verse. And if you've been pleased to give us the right interpretation of these words, we praise you and we thank you and we ask that you would take those truths home to us, that we would be delighted that Christ is our justification, that our whole lives would proclaim that Christ is our proclamation, and that we would be living in such a way that it would be evident that Christ is our exaltation, he is our victory, he is the reigning one. Slay us though they may, we will live for Christ our Lord is risen. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.