

Commentary from
"The Early Christian Letters for Everyone"
by N. T. Wright

1 PETER 3.17–22

Suffering for Doing Right

¹⁷It's better to suffer for good conduct (if God so wills it) than for bad. ¹⁸For the Messiah, too, suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, so that he might bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive by the spirit. ¹⁹In the spirit, too, he went and made the proclamation to the spirits in prison ²⁰who had earlier on been disobedient during the days of Noah, when God waited in patience. Noah built the

ark, in which a few people, eight in fact, were rescued through water. ²¹That functions as a signpost for you, pointing to baptism, which now rescues you – not by washing away fleshly pollution, but by the appeal to God of a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. ²²He has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand, with angels, authorities and powers subject to him.

The older I get, the more I dislike things which need to be put together, after you buy them, by following complicated instructions and diagrams. Part of my dislike is my sense that I will probably get it wrong, force something where it wasn't meant to go, and ruin the whole thing. Behind that is a lack of trust: sometimes the instructions and diagrams are not only unclear but actually inaccurate. Sometimes they describe another item, similar but not identical to the one we are trying to assemble.

The classic dilemma, when putting together something complicated out of many parts, is to finish the whole thing and then find that an important-looking part is still in the box. Morale sinks. Where should it go? What is it supposed to do? Why didn't we notice it before? We thought we were getting along quite nicely, but what shall we do now?

Many people have exactly that reaction when, after reading 1 Peter to this point, they suddenly stumble over chapter 3 verses 19, 20 and 21. We have become used to Peter warning his readers to expect suffering. He has already said that this may be inflicted by the authorities, even if in fact the Christians have done nothing to deserve it. He has already pointed out that this innocent suffering puts the Messiah's people in the place where the Messiah himself had been, the victim of the worst injustice of all. But now, quite suddenly, he tells us four new things. First, after his death Jesus made a 'proclamation' to 'the spirits in prison'. Second, these spirits had been disobedient in the days of Noah. Third, Noah's building of an ark to rescue

his family points forward to baptism. Fourth, baptism is less about washing clean and more about 'the appeal to God of a good conscience'. Here are not just one, but four elements which many readers might have preferred to leave in the box as they were mentally 'assembling' 1 Peter. What job are these pieces doing? What do they *mean*? How do they fit?

We should remind ourselves of what the passage is basically all about. It is an encouragement to people who are likely to suffer unjust treatment from the human authorities – not just, in other words, from a random act of mob violence or casual brutality, but an official, legal, persecution. And the point that Peter is making is not only that this brings them into line with the Messiah himself, who suffered in the same way. The point is that after his suffering *he announced God's victory over all 'authorities', particularly the ones in the heavenly places*. In other words, the point of these four elements, which may seem strange to us, is to add further dimensions to what he's already said about the new authorities. The human authorities embody 'spiritual' authorities which stand behind them in the shadowy, unseen realm. And Peter's point is that these complex authorities have received notice that Jesus has overthrown their power. He is now sovereign over the whole world, all other authorities included. That is why the passage ends with the emphatic claim that Jesus, through his **ascension** into heaven, now has 'angels, authorities and powers subject to him' (verse 22).

So how do these four apparently peculiar elements add up to this conclusion? Here there is a bit of local colour which will help. One of the better-known books in first-century Judaism, much treasured by many who were hoping for God to do some great act of liberation, was the one we know as *1 Enoch*. It wasn't actually written by the Enoch we find in Genesis 5.18–24, but it was written to look as though it was. This book traces the woes and problems of the world right back, in particular, to the wicked angels of Genesis 6, spiritual beings who, in the

1 PETER 3.17-22 Suffering for Doing Right

time of Noah, rebelled against God their creator. The book *1 Enoch* celebrates, in particular, the victory that God has won, or will win, over these spiritual beings. What Peter is saying here is that the victory over these dark forces of evil has in fact been won – through the Messiah; and that, after his resurrection (after he had been ‘made alive by the spirit’, as in verse 18), he, the Messiah, made this definitive announcement to the ‘spirits’: they had indeed been judged. Their power, such as it was, had been broken. This ought then to function as a considerable encouragement to the little groups of Christians who face persecution from their own local authorities, and from the shadowy spiritual ‘forces’ that seemed to give them their power. Ever since their original rebellion these ‘forces’ had been wielding usurped power. Now the Messiah has triumphed over them, and deep down they know it.

Noah’s ark, then, comes into the frame. There was a widespread belief among not only Jews but also pagans in ancient Turkey that Noah and his ark had come to rest on a mountain in their region. Peter is appealing to a story that was well known in the wider culture. Since that story involved people being rescued through the great flood, it is a fairly obvious picture of baptism, which in Romans 6 is seen as the means of dying and rising with the Messiah. But baptism, the thing which marks out the Christian publicly from the world around, isn’t just a matter of being made clean from one’s former life, though it can be seen that way as well. Precisely because it functions as the boundary marker for the Christian community, it shapes the confrontation that must then take place between that community and the watching world. As Peter has already said in verse 16, this means that baptism provides the ground (through the forgiveness of our sins through Jesus’ death) for that ‘good conscience’ which means that when the confrontation happens the Christian need not be ashamed.

The passage then really does fit together. These pieces, strange to us at first sight, really do belong where they are, and they

1 PETER 4.1-11 Transformed Living

mean what the opening and closing verses say they mean. What we need to know, when facing trouble or persecution, is this. Jesus the Messiah has fulfilled the hope of Israel by defeating all the spiritual powers in the world, the ones who were responsible for wickedness and corruption from ancient times. It may not look like it to the little Christian communities facing the possibility of suffering, but their baptism places them alongside the Messiah in his victory. They must hold their heads up, keep their consciences clear, and trust that his victory will be played out in the world to which they are bearing witness. There are many Christians today who need precisely this message. And those of us who don’t think we do should learn it, partly to pray for our brothers and sisters who are being persecuted and partly against the day when we might well suddenly need it ourselves.