

In our previous sections in this part of 1 Peter, Peter has been talking about what it means to be a Christian in specific circumstances, especially in very difficult circumstances. So he's talked about, for example, what it means to be a Christian under a difficult government. He's talked about what it means to be a Christian under a difficult boss. He's even talked about what it means to be a Christian in a difficult family situation. But now, to tie this all together, Peter is drawing some general conclusions, telling us what applies in every single time and place. This is why he says, starting in verse eight: "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." So when we face evil as Christians, especially when we face suffering as Christians, Peter calls for us to do what is right. To not meet evil with more evil, to meet reviling and abuse with more reviling and abuse, but to meet evil with good, to be the people that God has called us to be.

But that's not always easy. And especially in a situation where we might ask, "But Peter, what do we do when we've done everything right, when we've been who we're supposed to be, and we still suffer? I've been the best Christian citizen I can be. I've done everything that I'm supposed to do, but the government still is fighting against me. What do I do in that situation? I've been the very best Christian employee that I can be. I've done everything right. I've done what you want me to do, but my boss is still making it hard for me. What am I supposed to do? Or I've been the best Christian husband or the best Christian wife that I can be. But everything that I say seems to make things worse. I can't seem to win. What am I supposed to do in this situation? Or in a more general sense, it seems like everywhere I look around me, there are only enemies, enemies surrounded on every side, so that I don't know which way to turn. I don't know what I'm supposed to do. How am I supposed to be a Christian when being a Christian is what's making things harder for me in the first place?"

That's the situation that Peter is addressing in most of our reading for this evening. And this is what he means when he says, starting in verse 14: "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 honor Christ the Lord as holy." When we are faced with enemies on every side, Christians, when being a Christian makes life harder for us and not easier, God still calls for us to turn to him. To not be afraid of that which is around us, to not be afraid of when we have enemies on every side, but to honor Christ the Lord as holy in our hearts. Because whenever the Bible talks about the heart, it's talking about that part of us which is our inmost self, who we are as people. So to honor Christ the Lord as holy in our hearts means for us to send him as number one in our lives. To set him above all other things, so that when he is up there above all other things, no matter what we might be facing in this life, he's still taking care of us. And we look to him in every time and place.

So when, for example, we are facing difficulties in our government or uncertainty because of politics lately, honor Christ the Lord as holy in your hearts. Hold him up as number one above all things, and don't be afraid, because he is the one who is in control. When we're dealing with a difficult job, especially because we are Christians, honor Christ the Lord as holy in your hearts. Hold him up as number one, knowing that he will not abandon you in your time of need. When you're dealing with a difficult family life, especially because of being a Christian, honor Christ the Lord as holy in your hearts. Holding him up above all else, knowing that whatever you might

suffer in this life, God will not abandon you. And when you are surrounded on every side by enemies, and we don't know which way to turn, honor Christ the Lord as holy in your hearts, knowing that he is our fortress in the day of trouble. He will not fail to take care of you.

And when we honor him as holy within our hearts, when we hold him above every other thing, then we will be ready, as Peter goes on to say, "being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and respect." You'll be able to tell those enemies of yours why you are able to live this way, why you have such hope in the midst of all of these troubles. It may not make them very happy. It might cause some of these problems that we're talking about. But at the very least, we know that Jesus is with us in everything, and for that reason we don't have to be afraid.

This is why Peter goes on to give us a couple of examples of what it means to be steadfast, to be firm in the face of this kind of uncertainty. Now he does it here in what is admittedly one of the most difficult passages in the New Testament. And because it is so difficult, we have to break it down bit by bit so that we understand what he's saying. So the first example that he gives here in verse 18 is Jesus Christ himself. Peter says this: "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God." So in other words, when we are faced with all of these enemies which are surrounding us on every side, and we don't know which way to turn, we have an example in Christ himself. Because Jesus also suffered for doing the right thing. He also suffered having enemies on every side. Jesus never sinned once, and yet they crucified him because they hated him. He did nothing that deserved any of the things that he suffered, and yet he suffered them all for our sake. So when we are faced with our own enemies, our own uncertainties, we can look to Jesus who suffered all of those things, even to the point of death, because he honored his Father as holy in his heart, setting him above all things, even to the point of dying on that cross. Jesus will be with us, and when we are in him, we don't have to be afraid.

But the faithfulness of Jesus didn't stop when he died. This is what Peter means when he goes on and says, "being put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit." So in other words, between that time when he died and between that time when he appeared to his disciples, we're talking about that time period, Holy Saturday. "In which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison." Now that might be a little confusing, but we talk about this every time we recite the Apostles' Creed. This is when we say, "Jesus descended into hell." He's descending down into hell to proclaim to the spirits which are in prison. Now, why is he doing that? He's doing it because he has won the victory. He is proclaiming that he has defeated hell, that he has overcome the devil, that all of these forces which are before him are now destroyed forever. That's what Jesus was doing when he went into hell. He wasn't suffering more. He was on his victory march. He was breaking down the gates of hell and declaring his victory to all those within. But we might ask: "But what does that have to do with what we're talking about? Why does Peter bring this up?" Let me ask you this way, maybe so you can picture it. Picture Jesus standing in the midst of hell. He has broken down the gates. They are laying broken at his feet. And he is surrounded on every single side by those ancient demons, by the forces of evil. How would you react in a situation like that? How would you feel surrounded by so much evil? Jesus was not afraid. Jesus declared the victory over hell, because he honored his Father as holy even in the face of such tremendous evil. So when we are also face-to-face with evil in this world, we

don't have to be afraid of it either. Because we're in Jesus, and if Jesus can stand up to hell itself and declare that he has won the victory so that it no longer has any power over any of us, we too when faced with all of the powers of men can stand firm, knowing the Jesus has won that victory forever. That is a great comfort to us.

But now that brings us into our second example, one that continues on from this. Because those same demons were once the demons that led the people in the time of Noah astray. This is what he says starting in verse 20: "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." Now I want you to think about the days of Noah and what the demons did to mankind in those days. In Genesis chapter 6, we are told, for example, the sons of God saw the daughters of men and they took as many wives as they chose. Jesus says they were buying and selling, marrying and being given in marriage, and doing all of these things without any concern for God. They were in fact the very worst generation of men that have ever existed. So evil, in fact, that God destroyed them with the flood. And we're also told that in those days, there were the Nephilim, the great mighty men of old who also led men astray. It was a time of such tremendous evil that the only one left who was righteous was Noah. Yeah, his family was kind of there with him. But we know that not even they were as righteous as he. Noah was alone in the face of that generation. And yet he honored God as holy within his heart, doing what God wanted him to do despite all of the ridicule, despite all of the suffering that came with it. Because that ark took him years and years and years to build, possibly 120 years before God finally brought the flood. And so, can you imagine working virtually alone 120 years, with the only consolation being God, while the world around you is insulting you and making fun of you and persecuting you because of your belief in God. Noah knew what it meant to suffer. But he did not waver in his trust. And if he could face the worst that mankind had ever become and yet remain faithful to God, then we who are in God and in Christ Jesus can be strengthened to do the same.

In fact, God delivered him through water. Through the waters of the flood he brought Noah out of that evil generation and delivered him and saved him. And you too, Christians, have been saved through water, through the water of your holy Baptism which now saves you. Not just as a washing of dirt taking away grime from your body, but by giving you a new conscience, by giving you a transformation, making you into a new creation in God. And because you have been baptized into Christ, you have a sure foundation which will never give way. When you are surrounded on every side by enemies who want to tear you down, you can say with complete confidence, "I am baptized into Jesus Christ, and for that reason, there is no reason to fear."

So Christians, being a Christian may very well mean suffering, but remember the example of our Lord and the example of Noah, who show us what it means to honor God as holy within our hearts. Cling to him. Turn to him. Trust in him above all things. And no matter what happens in this life, God will not fail you. You are baptized into him and belong to him forever.

To him be the glory, now and forever. Amen.