

LORD OF THE HEART

SERIES: FLOURISH: HOPE IN A
STRANGE LAND



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1 Peter 3:13-22

Ninth Message

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1 Peter 3:13-22

I read an interview recently with a writer who claimed that she was content despite certain difficulties. She was asked, “Don’t you want more, sometimes?” She answered, “Well, no one ever wants less.”

Isn’t that the truth? We want. We want more. If it is the truth, what then do you do with the “more” you want? Let’s look at 1 Peter 3:13-22.

Have no fear

1 Peter 3:13-17:

Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? 14 But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, 15 but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always 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, 16 having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. 17 For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.

Peter asks the question, “Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good?” The answer, of course, coming from both 1 Peter and the book of Acts, including Peter’s own experience in the book of Acts, is, “Lots of people.” Indeed, Peter wants us to “turn away from evil and do good” (1 Peter 3:11) and to be “zealous for what is good”—and to be prepared to suffer for it. Peter was zealous for good, preaching the gospel, and was imprisoned for it (Acts 5:17-18).

Indeed, if you suffer for doing good, “for righteousness’ sake,” you’re blessed.¹ Peter takes us back to the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus said:

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. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you (Matthew 5:10-12).

The word translated “blessed” (*makarios*), which appears both in 1 Peter 3:14 and Matthew 5:10, is a difficult word to translate. It is not the usual word for “blessed.” What Jesus is saying, and what Peter is echoing, in the language of our day, is that people who suffer for doing good are in a good place. Why? Because the kingdom of heaven—the healing, loving rule of God—has drawn near in Jesus Christ, the king, and is now accessible. If you suffer for being zealous for what is good, know that Christ—and God’s healing, loving rule—is near now and that he will come in the future to make all things right.

Who is there to harm you? Not God. God, as we saw in verse 12, is not against those who do good but “against those who do evil.”² The apostle Paul puts it this way: “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31) It therefore doesn’t matter who is against us: “Have no fear of them, nor be troubled.”

Easier said than done, of course. Therefore, Peter tells us to, more literally, “set apart Christ as Lord in your hearts.” To sanctify something is to set it apart for something special. Often we are told in the New Testament that we have been, are being, or will be “sanctified,” set apart by and for God. Here Peter instructs us to sanctify the sanctifier: to set apart Christ as Lord in our hearts.

What do you want?

The heart is the wellspring of our desires. As humans, we want. We may not know *what* we want, but we know *that* we want. If you don’t think you want, sit quietly by yourself for thirty minutes—if you can. Most likely, you’ll feel desire, if only desire to fill the quiet.

Stanley Kunitz, former poet laureate of the United States, writes, “The longing for the dance / stirs in the

buried life.”³ Even if you’ve buried your desires, the longing for the dance, so to speak, still stirs in you.

What do you want? Be honest. Don’t pass judgment on what you want; just express what you want, simply to yourself.

I’ve realized that my deepest desires stem from two core desires: the desire for exhilaration and the desire for validation. I want to be involved in something exciting, something that makes me feel alive: I long for exhilaration. I also want to believe that I have some kind of contribution to make, that I matter: I long for validation. In the men’s groups that I lead, I always share about these twin desires, and many of the men have told me that they also long for exhilaration and validation. Especially, I want exhilaration and validation in relational and vocational contexts.

What do you want? If you’re able to feel and define what you want, you’ve found your heart.

Bring your desires to Christ

Now, set apart Christ as Lord in your heart, where your desires reside. If he’s Lord in your heart, he is Lord of your desires. Identify your desires and bring them to Christ. Speak to the Lord honestly about what you want. Present your desires to your Lord.

Jesus asked two of his disciples, James and John, “What do you want me to do for you?” They were hoping that Jesus would be enthroned in Jerusalem, and they wanted to reign with him. They answered, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” There is much James and John don’t understand about what they’re asking, and Jesus tells them so, but he doesn’t fault them for bringing their desires to him. In fact, he invites their honesty (Mark 10:35-40).

If you don’t identify your desires and bring them to Christ, you risk living a deadened life on the one hand or a self-indulgent life on the other hand. Jesus wants neither stoics nor profligates. He wants passionate disciples. When you bring your desires to Christ, you are opening your heart to him. You make your desires accessible to him. In so doing, you are opening your heart to his desires, and he desires passionate disciples.

If you bring your desires to Christ, do you know what you’re doing? You’re worshiping. You’re bringing gifts to the Lord, just as surely as the Magi brought him

gold, frankincense, and myrrh. These are deep desires, precious gifts. These are the gifts of your heart to the Lord of your heart.

Then watch what he does with them.

Ready to make a defense

Setting apart Christ as Lord in your heart by bringing your desires to him will help you not only be courageous in the face of opposition, it will also help prepare you “to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you”—even to those who oppose you. If we set apart Christ as Lord “in” our hearts, we will have a hope “in” us that we’re ready to share.

The “hope” that is in us as believers is the sure expectation of eternal life in the new and better world, which gives us confidence to face whatever this world throws at us. After all, we know that this world isn’t all there is. Some people, then, may recognize this confidence, this hope, and even ask us about it. The word translated “reason” would be more literally translated “word.” Sure, some may specifically ask us for the reason for our hope, but others may ask us about our hope in any manner of ways.

One of the reasons we’re so polarized in this country is that many people have come to believe that the other side poses an existential threat. For those of us who believe that a new world is coming, there is no existential threat, and there never will be, because Jesus Christ is Lord of this world, even now, and his kingdom will come. These days, while others panic, God may give us unique opportunities to speak a word about the hope that is in us.

Often 1 Peter 3:17 is understood as an exhortation for believers to delve into the field of “apologetics” so that they can defend the faith from a rational perspective. Indeed, all believers should learn that faith in Christ is rationally defensible, even rationally preferable—not only to defend the faith but also to bolster their own faith.

Early in my life as a believer, I took a class in apologetics, and I found it helpful. I especially appreciated—and continue to appreciate—the theological argument for the existence of God, the moral argument for the existence of God, and the argument for the resurrection.

However, if we are to give a word for the hope that is in us, and that word comes from having set apart Christ

as Lord in our hearts, then the word we have to speak will at least in part concern what Christ means to us.

We should speak with “gentleness” and literally “fear”—fear of God—with a good conscience, not to win an argument with opponents but to win the lost to Christ. Indeed, if we respond in gentleness, especially when attacked, someone might be “put to shame,” discern that the hope that is in us is real, and turn to Christ for forgiveness.

Obviously, if you’re going to suffer, it’s better to suffer for a good reason (doing good) than for a bad reason (doing evil). Obviously, it is not God’s will that you do evil, though it may be his will that you suffer for doing evil. Instead, it is God’s will that you do good, and even then it may be his will that you suffer for doing good.

Indeed, if you suffer for doing good, you’re blessed—you’re in a good place. It is especially good, in this context, because suffering for doing good may give you an opportunity to share the hope that is in you.

If we are to bring our desires to Christ, perhaps we might hesitate, wondering if Christ can be trusted with our desires. So, can he be trusted?

Christ suffered to bring you to God

1 Peter 3:18-22:

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, 19 in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, 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. 21 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, 22 who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

If we need inspiration for doing good and accepting the suffering that may come from it, Peter once again holds up Christ as an example, just as he did in 1 Peter 2:21-25. Christ suffered for sins, but not his own

sins. He suffered for our sins—the “righteous for the unrighteous.” To suffer unjustly is one thing; to suffer unjustly for someone else’s sins is another thing. To suffer unjustly for the sins of the whole world is suffering on an unimaginable scale. Moreover, Christ suffered in this manner to “bring us to God.”

Christ’s suffering culminated when he was “put to death in the flesh” on the cross. Having died, however, he was “made alive in the spirit”—that is, he was resurrected from the dead by the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:11).

Can Christ be trusted with your desires? Herman Melville said that the “mass of men” distrust God’s heart because they “fancy him all brain, like a watch.”

The verb translated “suffered” (*paschō*) means, generally, to feel deep emotion. The related noun is *pathōs*, which has worked its way into the English language and is also attached to such words as “empathetic” and “sympathetic.” Specifically, the verb is often used in the context of suffering. The Latin noun related to the Greek noun *pathos* is *passiō*, which is related to the English word “passion.” Thus, the crucifixion and the events around it are called “The Passion.”

All brain, like a watch? Look at the cross! Look at the man hanging there. Now look into his heart. What do you see?

Consider what he went through, suffering unjustly for your sins and the sins of the whole world, in order to bring you to God! We want. We want more. No one ever wants less. What does Christ want? He wants you! Consider what he went through to understand how much he wants you. Talk about validation!

Now, do you think you can trust Christ with your desires? He suffered to bring you to God; now bring your desires to him.

One hundred years old

A few days back I spent about an hour or so with Muriel Thompson, a longtime PBCer, while we were filming her for her one hundredth birthday. She talked about her desires over the course of her life—and what the Lord did with her desires. In some cases, he granted her desires. In other cases, he transformed her desires.

Muriel wanted to be an overseas missionary, but the Lord didn’t grant that desire. Instead, he made her the first director of the first Crisis Pregnancy Center in the

Bay Area, which is now called Real Options. She realized that her desire to be a missionary was being fulfilled as she was helping the young women who came to her.

In all cases, whether the Lord granted her desires or transformed her desires, Muriel concludes, “The Lord’s been so good to me.” Muriel’s very life, all one hundred years of it, witnesses to the hope that is in her.

Victory over evil

To say the least, the rest of the passage presents an interpretive challenge. It’s easy to get lost in the theological weeds here. Martin Luther commented, “This is a strange text and certainly a more obscure passage than any other passage in the New Testament. I still do not know for sure what the apostle meant.” Presumably, Peter’s first readers understood him, even if his words are more obscure to us.

However, though the particulars may be difficult for us to grasp, the point is clear: Christ, having suffered unjustly, triumphed over evil, which means, in the context of 1 Peter, that his followers will also triumph over evil, even if they also suffer unjustly.

No interpretation of these verses is without difficulty. In my not-without-difficulty view, the key to understanding the particulars is to recognize that the verses are bound together by the verb that appears in both verse 19 and verse 22. In verse 19, it is translated “went”; in verse 22, it is translated “gone.” Where did Christ go after he was resurrected? He went to heaven (verse 22). What did he do? He “proclaimed to the spirits in prison” (verse 19). What did he proclaim? He proclaimed victory over them. Indeed, in his resurrection, Christ triumphed over “angels, authorities, and powers,” including “the spirits in prison.”

These particular spirits, fallen angels and/or demonic spirits, somehow “did not obey” in the days of Noah and were then restrained by God in some way. Even though other biblical passages, not to mention the apocryphal book of 1 Enoch, have been appealed to in order to make sense of this passage, much remains obscure.⁴

Scholar Karen Jobes observes:

Their imprisonment represents in spatial terms God’s restraining power over them, and the message Christ preached to them is the confirmation that “the day of the great conclusion, first announced by the flood, is now upon them. Christ’s ascension itself may have been the

*proclamation of their defeat. In other words, the apostle Peter is identifying Jesus Christ as the victor over all evil in both the spirit and the human worlds forevermore.*⁵

Larger salvation

In the days of Noah, God judged humanity in the flood but saved a few people. The salvation of these eight people prefigures the larger, eternal salvation of those who are placed not in an ark but in Christ, who brings us not to dry land but to God—and to the new world.

When we believe in Christ, we are baptized into Christ, becoming one with him, so that we die to sin and rise to new life, mirroring his death and resurrection. Water baptism, in a visceral way that involves sights, sounds, and sensations, tells the story of this reality. Thus, baptism “corresponds to” the deliverance of Noah and his family.

It is not the rite of baptism that saves us, as if removing dirt from our bodies has anything to do with removing sin from our lives, but “an appeal to God for a good conscience”—that is faith in Christ. Even faith in Christ would not be enough, of course, unless Christ rose from the dead. Thus we are saved “through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” Christ brings us to God, and the writer of Hebrews encourages us to draw near to God “with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience” (Hebrews 10:22).

If Peter’s readers are worried that God might not be concerned for them because they are few in number, Peter encourages them by observing that God went to great lengths in Noah’s day to save “a few”—only eight people. If we are concerned that we are few in number, we should be likewise encouraged.

Again, the point of 1 Peter 3:18-22: Be “zealous for what is good” and be ready to “suffer for righteousness’ sake,” to “suffer for doing good,” and you will be vindicated, just as Jesus was vindicated.

You can’t out-dream Jesus

James and John wanted to reign with Jesus in Jerusalem. They were thinking old Jerusalem. Jesus was thinking new Jerusalem. He was getting them ready to reign there. He was also getting them ready to serve as apostles and for the immeasurable privilege of suffering for the gospel. Indeed, James would be martyred, and John, a “partaker of the tribulation” of Christ, would be

sent into exile, where he wrote the book of Revelation (Acts 12:1-2, Revelation 1:9).

Always remember: You can't out-dream Jesus.

You want. You want more. No one ever wants less. What do you do with your desires? You bring them to Christ. Then you watch what he does with them.

It's exhilarating!

Endnotes

- 1 The adjective translated "will be blessed" does not necessarily convey any time reference and would literally be translated "blessed."
- 2 The verb translated "to harm" (*kakoō*) in verse 13 is related to the adjective translated "evil" (*kaka*) in verse 12: "But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil."
- 3 Stanley Kunitz, "Touch Me," *The Collected Poems* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2002).
- 4 See Genesis 6:1-8, 2 Peter 2:4-10, Jude 6, and Revelation 20:1-10.
- 5 Karen H. Jobes, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: 1 Peter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005) 244.