

1 Peter 3:13-22 – “Good Suffering?”¹

Before the Lesson: Prepare a/v equipment to show the Powerpoint of Anastasis/Resurrection images. Make copies of the handout on “He Descended into Hell” for the Instruction time.

Fellowship Question: (Use *one* of these to break the ice, to begin some discussion and lead into the study):

A good thing someone did for me lately was...

When parting from someone, I usually say... (“have a nice day”, “be safe”, take care”, etc.)

Information

Peter is writing to a suffering Church. They are scattered in what we now call northern Turkey. We don’t know if the persecution they are experiencing is from society (neighbors, co-workers, etc.) or if it is sanctioned by the government. Either way, there is enough pain that Peter addresses it throughout his letter.

- Have a class member read 1 Peter 3:13-17.

What is your response when someone does a good thing for you? (I thank them, I offer to help them in kind, I feel good about do-gooder, etc.)

Peter begins this text by asking a question that should be answered with something like, “be nice to others and they’ll be nice to you.” That usually works. But it was not working for these Christians. They were being punished for doing good. Why would a good group get persecuted? (they seem odd in their behavior, the persecution tests if they really are who they claim to be, guilt drives the guilty to punish the innocent, etc.)

“Peter’s insistence that suffering leads to blessing puts a different spin on the parting wish that has become common in recent years. In many circles, ‘have a nice day’ has become, ‘have a blessed day!’ If blessing comes through suffering, we may not be so eager to be blessed.”²

So, a question is, “are we willing to be blessed by being persecuted?” What do you think?

Jesus said the persecuted were blessed.

- Have a class member read Matthew 5:10.

¹ This lesson is copyrighted by Dr. Rick Jordan, Great Bible Teachers, Inc, 2023. More lessons may be found at greatbibleteachers.com.

² Tony Cartledge, “Good Suffering: Digging Deeper: On being blessed,” *Nurturing Faith*, May 25, 2014.

We would probably agree with the statement that “we are blessed to live in a land where we are free to worship without fear of persecution.” How does that compare to : “Would that we were persecuted for our faith so we might be more like Christ and receive the kingdom of heaven?”

The fact is, we have no Biblical prayers that persecution will fall on the Church causing us to be more like Christ. But we do have passages like this one that say, “If/when persecution comes, do not be surprised, do not be afraid (because God is with you) and do not return evil for evil.”

- Have a class member read James 1:2-4.

The third verse of the hymn *Amazing Grace* speaks to this:

“Through many dangers, toils, and snares
I have already come.
‘Tis grace has led me safe thus far,
And Grace will lead me home.”

Difficult times (such as persecution) can be times that try and strengthen our faith. Can someone share an example of that?

Peter says to us “do not fear people, but fear God.” The word for “sanctify” or “revere” in verse 15 is based on an Old Testament text.

- Have a class member read Isaiah 8:11-13.

This word for fear, *agiasare*, rebukes an inward fear of outside forces. “The inward acknowledgement of Christ’s Lordship... must take place ‘in your hearts’, as the positive counterpoint to the ‘fear’ against which he has just issued a warning... It is this ‘holy fear’ or respectful awe focused on Christ, that drives out other fears, and makes possible an honest and effective response to interrogation.”³

According to verse 16, what should our attitude be when we are defending our beliefs or behavior? (rebuke with gentleness and respect)

“The attitude of our witness is more important than any satisfaction we might gain from a verbal retaliation. Others may bring shame on themselves in mistreating us, but we should not bring shame upon ourselves or the cause of Christ.”⁴

- Have a class member read 1 Peter 3:18-22.

³ J. Ramsey Michaels. *1 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary, 49 (Waco: Word, 1988), 187.

⁴ Tony Cartledge, “Good Suffering,” *Nurturing Faith*, May 25, 2014.

In verse 18, Peter notes that the suffering Christ did was for a reason. What was that reason? (“in order to bring you to God”) This is Peter’s concern through this letter – our attitude and lifestyle should be such that whether life is peaceful or turbulent, our actions will bring people to God.

The next part of this passage is the source of endless debate in the Church. If you were raised in a liturgical church, you said the Apostle’s Creed every Sunday, which included the phrase “he descended into Hell.” Where did Jesus go and when did he go there and why did he go there?

The Presbyterian minister, Frederick Buechner, puts it this way:

There is an obscure passage in the First Letter of Peter where the old saint writes that after the crucifixion, Jesus went and preached to ‘the spirits in prison, who formerly did not obey’ (3:19-20), and it’s not altogether clear just what spirits he had in mind. Later on, however, he is not obscure at all. ‘The gospel was preached even to the dead,’ he says, ‘that though judged in the flesh like men, they might live in the spirit like God’ (4:5-6).

‘He descended into hell,’ is the way the Apostles’ Creed puts it, of course. It has an almost blasphemous thud to it, sandwiched there between the muffled drums of ‘was crucified, dead, and buried’ and the trumpet blast of ‘the third day he rose again from the dead.’ Christ of all people, in hell of all places! It strains the imagination to picture it, the Light of the World making his way through the terrible dark to save whatever ones he can. Yet in view of what he’d seen of the world during his last few days in the thick of it, maybe the transition wasn’t as hard as you might think.

The fancifulness of the picture gives way to what seems, the more you turn it over in your mind, the inevitability of it. Of course that is where he would have gone. Of course that is what he would have done. Christ is always descending and redescending into hell.

‘Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden’ is spoken to *all*, whatever they’ve done or left undone, whichever side of the grave their hell happens to be on.⁵

Did you know that there is a difference in how Jesus’ resurrection is portrayed in Western (Catholic and Protestant) and Eastern (Orthodox) art? We know that there is no written description of Jesus’ act of a physical resurrection from the tomb. Artists were not given details as they were with other Gospel stories. So, two distinct schools of depiction began early in the Church’s history. Eventually the Western branch of the church choose one way to portray the Resurrection (Jesus leaving the tomb as an individual) while the Eastern branch of the church chose another image (a universal resurrection called *Anastasis*).

“The first direct image of the Resurrection appeared by the year 400. We consider it part of the *individual resurrection tradition* because it focuses on Christ alone.... The second direct Resurrection image was created by the year 700. We term it part of the *universal resurrection tradition* because, instead of rising alone, Christ raises all humanity with him. He reaches out to

⁵ <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2018/3/14/descent-into-hell?rq=descend> accessed 8/1/2023. “Originally published in *Whistling in the Dark* and later in *Beyond Words*”

Adam and Eve, the biblical parents and symbols for humanity itself, raises them up, and leads them out of Hades, the prison of death.”⁶

“Anastasis and Resurrection are both present, but in this final step they are now separated into two events in the West, [descending into Hades to preach to the ‘souls in prison’ and then Jesus’ exiting the tomb alone] while in the East they always remain a single event. This Western solution of retaining the universal resurrection tradition by renaming it the ‘Harrowing of Hell’ or ‘Descent into Hades/Hell/Limbo,’ and thereby separating it permanently from Christ’s now normative individual resurrection continues throughout the second millennium of Christianity.”⁷

[Show PowerPoint and/or point out on handout samples of both depictions of the Resurrection.]

Transformational Exercise

At this writing, the American Church is free of the type of persecution the recipients of 1 Peter faced. We might argue whether that is a good thing for the Church or not.

Persecution is the blessing no one wants.

But all of us probably do face the fear of rejection if we choose to give a more visible witness. We do not want to be arrogant or obnoxious. We want to be sincere and do good works with integrity.

If we follow Peter’s teaching, we do what we do so that we can show others God’s love and grace. As we act, our attitude should be, “I do this because, were Jesus on earth today, he would do this.”

Your soul work homework this week will be fun, I think. Practice saying something radically different as you leave people. Do you normally say, “Have a nice day”? How about saying, “Have a difficult day!” Instead of “be safe” how about “be risky!”

How do you feel about that assignment?

You may not want to do it with everyone, but maybe with a person you could explain why you said? Give it a try, pay attention to what you are wishing for people when you “bless” them.

[Close in a prayer something like this:] *God, we want to be faithful to you in good times and in trying times. We know that we grow in our faith in the valleys of life. Be with us. Give us what we need to become more like you. Bless us with trials and persecutions, if that is your will. Amen.*

⁶ John Dominic Crossan and Sarah Sexton Crossan, *Resurrecting Easter: How the West Lost and the East Kept the Original Easter Vision* (New York: HarperOne, 2018), 3.

⁷ Crossan, 149.

“He Descended into Hell”

There is an obscure passage in the First Letter of Peter where the old saint writes that after the crucifixion, Jesus went and preached to ‘the spirits in prison, who formerly did not obey’ (3:19-20), and it’s not altogether clear just what spirits he had in mind. Later on, however, he is not obscure at all. ‘The gospel was preached even to the dead,’ he says, ‘that though judged in the flesh like men, they might live in the spirit like God’ (4:5-6).

‘He descended into hell,’ is the way the Apostles’ Creed puts it, of course. It has an almost blasphemous thud to it, sandwiched there between the muffled drums of ‘was crucified, dead, and buried’ and the trumpet blast of ‘the third day he rose again from the dead.’ Christ of all people, in hell of all places! It strains the imagination to picture it, the Light of the World making his way through the terrible dark to save whatever ones he can. Yet in view of what he’d seen of the world during his last few days in the thick of it, maybe the transition wasn’t as hard as you might think.

The fancifulness of the picture gives way to what seems, the more you turn it over in your mind, the inevitability of it. Of course that is where he would have gone. Of course that is what he would have done. Christ is always descending and reascending into hell.

‘Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden’ is spoken to *all*, whatever they’ve done or left undone, whichever side of the grave their hell happens to be on.⁸

Two examples of Jesus’ Resurrection⁹



Western Church - Resurrection



Eastern Church - Jesus in Hades

Jesus is raised, alone; guards are present

Jesus is ready to ascend, bringing others with him

⁸ <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2018/3/14/descent-into-hell?rq=descend> accessed 8/1/2023. “Originally published in *Whistling in the Dark* and later in *Beyond Words*”

⁹ Pictures are from the book, John Dominic Crossan and Sarah Sexton Crossan, *Resurrecting Easter: How the West Lost and the East Kept the Original Easter Vision* (New York: HarperOne, 2018)

