

1 Peter 3:18-22 “Valleys and Victory with Jesus”

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Before we jump back into the next passage of 1 Peter this morning, our passage today gives us the opportunity to talk about a theological concept called the perspicuity of Scripture and who here is not looking for a chance to talk about the Bible's perspicuity, right?

That is why you came this morning. It means the clarity of God's Word. That's why they pick such a clear word like perspicuity for clarity, okay?

That'll help you remember. It means the fact that we can understand God's Word. I bet that every one of us at some point has read part of the Bible.

Perhaps even this week if you're doing the Bible reading plan with us, you may have been in the book of Leviticus and you've read a passage and thought, I don't have a clue what that means.

[1 : 14] I don't understand that at all. And I hope this encourages you. Some parts of the Bible are harder to understand than others, but even when that's true, the message of God's Word is clear.

It's perspicuous, if you will. Listen to how the Westminster Confession of Faith says this. All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all.

Yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.

God gives us His Word so that we might know Him. So that we might know how to live in relationship with Him, which does not require a seminary degree.

Did you know that? It does not require a correct understanding of every theological detail. Thank goodness. Amen? It's about a relationship.

[2 : 44] So remember, when it feels confusing or difficult as you're reading God's Word, it's not because He's hiding from you. He's showing you Himself in some ways that are easier for you to access than others.

Peter says later in his second letter, chapter 3, verse 16, that some things that Paul writes are hard to understand. Is that not encouraging to you?

Peter found some things that this crazy Paul guy wrote to be hard to understand. Some of you have found some things Paul wrote to be hard to understand. But he says, don't be distracted when that happens.

Rather, grow in grace and the knowledge of Jesus Christ. Don't miss that. Those crucial things are the clearest things, right?

God reveals Himself so that we might know Him, so that we might understand ourselves, so that we might find life as He designed us to have it.

[3 : 52] Why all this talk about clarity, about perspicuity? Well, this passage in 1 Peter 3 that we're about to read has for centuries been referred to as the most difficult to understand in the whole New Testament.

Many theologians, all sorts of people with different opinions about what it means, but they agree on this. It's hard to understand, and I'm not sure. And I've read, and I've studied a lot, and I'm not sure I have the right understanding of this passage, which leaves the potential this morning for a really unclear sermon, right?

I want to be honest about that with you. I also don't want that to discourage you. I want us to expect that the things God most wants us to hear, His Spirit will speak clearly to our hearts as we open His Word.

That's what He does. He loves to do that, okay? So we're going to look at this, and we're going to trust Him to speak clearly to us. And after I read it, you'll start praying for me that we will understand.

1 Peter 3, beginning at verse 18, this is the inerrant, infallible, even perspicuous Word of God, the God who loves us so much that He wants us to know Him.

[5 : 20] 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.

Let's pray together. Father, we do ask for Your help, that You, by Your Spirit, would be our teacher this morning.

Not merely because we want to know what this means, although we ask for Your insight, for Your Spirit to shine light on this Word that we have just read.

There's nothing more important than Your Word for us to understand. But Father, we ask it because we want to love and trust our Savior more, to know where our hope should be, to know in the difficulties of life what to hold on to and how to do that.

[6 : 56] So would You speak to us clearly and give us ears to hear and hearts to obey and love and trust. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Last week we noticed that the rest of Peter's letter that we're studying here focuses on suffering in the lives of God's people.

He's wanting us to endure faithfully in a world that is not our home. Now here's our picture of the Ukrainian violinist if you were here last week.

He wants us to endure by remembering who we are, right? Held in His hand. Part of a courageous people with an eternal hope.

And in verses 13 to 18, the key principle about suffering was that those bad things in our lives provide good opportunities for sharing with others the eternal hope that we have in Jesus.

[8 : 04] Today, in the verses we just read, the principle about suffering builds on that. Because Jesus has endured our sufferings, we can be assured we will enjoy His victory.

Where do we get that hope that we're called to share, especially in the dark times? Where does that come from? It comes from our connection with Jesus.

Our union with Christ. That's what gives us this assurance. And it's really glorious. Y'all, can we just stay in verse 18 for a while this morning?

Can we vote on that? Let's just talk about verse 18. For all the complexity and confusion of verses 19 to 21, the good news of verse 18 is amazingly clear and perspicuous and glorious.

Okay, let's start there. Our connection to Jesus here begins with Jesus entering our sufferings.

That's the connection in verse 18 from what we've been reading.

[9 : 17] Hey, Christians suffering unjust, Christ also suffered. That's what Peter's saying. Christ also suffered horribly.

Emotionally, physically, spiritually, unjustly. Jesus has endured the sufferings of a world that is not His home.

In fact, Jesus so identifies, not with His successful people. Interesting. Jesus so identifies with His suffering people, He's so close to them in that, that when Saul, who's about to become Paul in this story, is killing Christians, is persecuting the church, the followers of Jesus, Jesus confronts Saul on the road and says, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?

Isn't that amazing? How closely Jesus identifies with those of His people who are struggling. If you feel the pain of suffering as a child of God today, be assured, your older brother feels it with you.

He hurts with you. And that's because He has hurt like you for you.

[10 : 43] This is the glorious good news of Jesus. When He suffered, it wasn't merely to empathize with your sufferings. It was to end your sufferings once and for all, one day, forever.

Right? Christ also suffered once, once and for all, for sins, the righteous Him for the unrighteous you that He might bring you to God.

Don't miss the glorious message of the gracious Savior. Every one of us has a sin and shame problem.

We're messed up. We feel that the dirt that is on us, it clings to us and we want to hide it, right? We don't want to be seen and exposed.

And He washed it away by forgiving our sins, all of them, by washing us clean. Every one of us has a guilt problem, a huge debt that we can't pay.

[11 : 56] We can't afford it. But He paid it all in our place. It was our sins. Let's be clear, right? Jesus was on the cross for our sins, not His.

Our sins deserved the cross. And every one of us has a relationship problem, not just a sin and shame problem, not just a guilt problem.

We've got this relationship problem where we're distant from God. We're separated from Him because of all this sin that we've talked about, the very God we were created to live with and that's the purpose of life.

We're stuck away from Him. And Jesus brought us back near to God. The good news of Jesus is that you don't have to fix any of these problems yourself.

You don't. It's not up to you. You are connected to your Savior. You are so covered by your substitute that you are safe and accepted and beloved forever.

[13 : 02] That's the glory of grace, right? That is the simplicity of substitution that Jesus stands in your place and before the throne of God above I have a strong and perfect plea.

It's not something I've done. It's a great high priest whose name is love who ever lives and he pleads for me, right? He stands there in my place.

So we sing the vilest offender who truly believes that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.

Amen? That's why we sing that because Jesus has indeed won our forgiveness at the cost of his blood on the cross.

Praise the Lord, right? Friend, listen. If you don't stand covered by Jesus right now, if you don't know that that's who you are is that you are his and that he is yours, please don't let anything after verse 18 distract you from the wonder and the glory of Jesus offering himself to you right now to cover you today and forever.

Receive his mercy substituting in your place. That's all it takes. Rejoice in this brand new relationship with the God who made you and loves you and wants to know you.

[14 : 26] Jesus gives you that relationship again. That is the clear hope of this passage. Sins dealt with. Man and God set right.

Unworthy prodigals brought back home covered by Jesus once and for all. That's there for you for all of us today. I've told you before one of my favorite pictures of this from a PBS documentary about sheep.

The story begins with an orphaned sheep who will most surely die the narrator tells us. Every time the little sheep runs up to the milk that he needs to live the ewe lambs kick him away because he doesn't belong to them.

That's us, right? Far from God deserving death unworthy not belonging in his family. Death is coming soon.

But then the mood of the music turns hopeful and you know something good is coming and the narrator says, ah, but the shepherd knows best.

[15 : 37] And what the shepherd does is he goes and he finds one of the little lambs that is nursing with his mother and he takes that lamb and he shears his wool coat off of him and then he scoops up the orphaned lamb in his arms and he puts that coat leg by leg over that little lamb and he puts him back down and he sends him running right back over to the mother of the first lamb who bends over and sniffs and feels and welcomes him back in recognizing her child she brings this orphaned lamb back in to tend for and care for as her own child accepted and beloved and saved.

Listen, especially if you've never trusted Jesus before. Jesus, the lamb of God, the rightful son offers you his coat.

Offers to cover you no matter what you've done, no matter where you've been, no matter how little you deserve to be in his family and if you put that coat on God won't be fooled by it, he sees you.

He will be delighted to welcome you into his family to feed you from the bounty of his table and the riches of his grace to keep you close to his side forever.

It's all of grace. It's not up to how well you perform. You don't have to worry about that this morning. He has paid it all once and for all. It is finished.

[17:23] That's the gospel, dear friends. It's good news. If you don't know it and if that's not yours personally, there's nothing I would commend to you more. There's nothing I'd rather share with you.

There's no hope I'd rather you have than that good news. Talk to any of us. We'd love to tell you more about Jesus. It's not complicated, but it's good, good news.

Now there's more good news for us as we're in our suffering of how connected we are to Jesus.

That reality that many of you know that you are connected to him and covered by him.

It's just a little harder to understand as we keep going through this passage. I'm going to give you my best shot at seeing glorious gospel complexity. Some of you like complexity, right?

So you're fired up about this. But Jesus was put to death in the realm of the physical but made alive in the realm of the spiritual. He had a body then too, right?

[18:30] Risen bodily from the dead. So the emphasis here is on the eternal lasting nature of the spiritual realm. And verse 19 says, in that manner, spiritual, he went and preached to spirits who are now in prison.

Proclaiming to spirits in prison. Who is that? When did that happen? Why do we care? All very valid questions.

Very few people agree on the answers. I think that the spirits in prison are unbelieving people who were on earth during the time of Noah and have now died and are in prison because of their unbelief and disobedience.

And I think that Jesus preached to them back then in Noah's day through the spirit. Now one of the reasons earlier in this book, chapter 1, verse 11, Peter refers to these Old Testament prophets preaching as the spirit of Christ speaking through them.

So when Noah foretells God's judgment in the form of a flood, he says, God told me a flood is coming, his judgment, and he calls the people of his day to find safety where?

[19:59] In the ark. He told me to build this ark. You need to come with me. You'll be safe. That's Jesus in the spiritual realm proclaiming to the people their need to repent and trust Yahweh.

That's the only place they'll find safety. And I think why it comes up here is that Peter is recalling this other time many, many, many years ago where the people of God, Noah and his family, they were in the minority, they were suffering ridicule, and he's saying Jesus was there preaching by his spirit back then when, that word because could mean when they were not obeying, back in the days of Noah, building the ark and God being patient and not yet sending his judgment even though there was unbelief, he hadn't yet poured out his judgment, and that's when all this happened.

Another reason I find this understanding to fit with Peter's flow of thought in this passage is that he just told us what last week? He told us to preach, to witness, to share the hope that we have in the midst of our suffering with anyone who asks, right?

And now he's assuring us Jesus is with us in that preaching as well. In that difficult experience, Jesus has faced unbelief and scorn.

An ark in a desert? Come on, Noah. Really? A resurrected Jesus?

[21:49] Come on, Will. It's not even Easter anymore. Stop talking about that stuff. You can't be serious. You really believe that? And so, Jesus knows when you preach, when you share your hope, it's often rejected, even ridiculed.

Don't lose heart, he's saying. There's hope even then. As it turned out, the ark was the place of safety, wasn't it? when the flood came, the eight family members of Noah were the ones who were saved.

And then Peter says, while we're making things confusing, let's have some more fun with 21st century Christians. No, I don't think that's what Peter says.

I think what Peter says next is, while we're thinking of people being saved through water, that makes me think of your baptism. It's like that too.

There's judgment due to sin, but if you run to the ark of Jesus, the water, it will wash you, it will cleanse you, you'll be saved in just the same way like Noah and his family.

[23:14] But if you read verse 21 carefully, it states, baptism now saves you. And if you've been in a church like this long enough, you think, hold on, that's not right.

I read verse 18. I'm saved by Christ alone. His death for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous to bring you to God. Now I'm getting confused again.

Why did we go past verse 18? Peter says, don't be confused. I'm not talking of course, he clarifies for us.

I'm not talking of the physical water of baptism that would wash dirt off your body, that that process, that that ceremony would actually be what cleanses and saves you.

But rather, the washing with water is a sign of the heart reality. You're united to Christ and he is the only one who saves. So your appeal to God from a good conscience, from your faith in the risen Jesus, that's how you're saved.

[24 : 25] Through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. So listen, your union with Jesus, where you're connected with him, it's not just him entering into your sufferings and into your preaching in a difficult context.

Christ, it's about you entering his resurrection life. Romans 6, 5, if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

Both of those are true. We need that Easter hope right there, right? If you have died with him and if you've experienced those sufferings and you're having yourself put to death, you will also live.

Baptism may be a bit complex and how it works out that it's a sign pointing to something else.

Maybe we don't get all the nuances right. Some Christians who really love Jesus still get confused about exactly how baptism works out.

Amen? Yep. You know what we're all clear on? It points to the cleansing work of Jesus who lives so that connected to him, we too never more will die.

[25 : 38] As surely as Jesus who endured even more suffering than we have to the point of death on the cross. As surely as he is alive again, so you too who are suffering, who feel worldly powers against you, who feel like you're given over to death day after day and you have to walk back into this situation or back into this relationship and back into this struggle, you can rest assured that no matter what happens in this life, you will live again and forever.

Here's the point. Jesus lives again. You live again forever with him. That's what I think is going on in that middle section and there's one more thing that is even more wonderful than that.

A glorious gospel certainty in this last verse. This resurrected Jesus has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

Okay, now we're tracking again. We've been singing about this this morning. Jesus is not merely alive, wondrous though that is. He is reigning over everything, victorious over it all.

Now, this truth, to be fair, fits really well with the other most likely understanding of the previous verses, besides the one I gave you.

[27 : 19] That spirits in prison part that we read, a number of people, another possible understanding, especially if you like to read this passage chronologically and assume that the preaching to the spirits happened in the days between Jesus' death and his resurrection, that understanding would be that Jesus proclaimed his victory to fallen angels, demons, spirits, in prison.

Don't get hung up on figuring out which one of us is right. You know I'm right. No, it doesn't matter which one of us got the understanding of verse 19 through 21, right?

Whether verse 19 paints that triumphant picture or not, verse 22 makes it really clear, doesn't it? It makes it very clear Jesus has indeed triumphed, he is reigning, he is victorious, stick with the clear part, so listen, why does that matter?

It matters because some of you are hurting. all of you know suffering, some of you are feeling it this morning. Some of you are feeling overwhelmed by spiritual attack, evil spirits, hosts of hell arrayed against you, the reality of spiritual warfare and you're living in it and you can have hope, you can rest assured that you will share Jesus' victory.

Jesus is with us in our suffering, right? He's there, you're not alone and look where he ends up having endured death, he rises to new life and eternal victory at the right hand of the Father over all of his and our enemies forever.

[29 : 15] How does that encourage me when I'm struggling when I'm losing, when I'm suffering? It tells you your hope is not fanciful, it's not naive optimism, it's not a selfish vanity, you haven't made this up, no, if you are really suffering, if you have died with him, you will live with him, if he endured your sufferings and now reigns over all, you will assuredly enjoy his victory with him, remember you're connected to him, if he's there, you will be there with him, you are seated, Derek read earlier

to us, with Christ in the heavenly places, so right now even, already, Christ in you, is what?

The hope of glory, you have right now living in you in relationship with Jesus, the hope of glory, one day forever reigning victoriously with him, I've shared with you before, one of my favorite images of our sharing Christ's victory because we're united to him.

Team Hoyt was a father-son triathlon team, they together completed 257 triathlons including Ironmans, 72 marathons, they're five ahead of me, Rick, I've been dreaming lately, Rick the son was born with cerebral palsy, he was unable to talk or to walk but his dad realized how much they enjoyed being together, spending time together, especially outside when they could run so they developed some specialized devices for staying connected during the triathlons, Dick biking with Rick attached to him, then getting off and jumping into a boat where he could place Rick and then swim attached to him, and then running together while pushing Rick in a specialized wheelchair, they both suffered the pain of a triathlon, bodies hurting as the sun beat down, the wind blowing in their faces as they're running or biking.

But my favorite images are of Team Hoyt crossing the finish line. Rick, almost always in these pictures, has this joy across him.

There's a big smile often on his face. His fists are always pumping in the air as they cross the line. He is celebrating victory, and he's loving it.

[32 : 20] I think we're all pretty clear. The victory was earned by Dick, suffering the pains of the race to get to that victory, even more than the other competitors out there.

The victory was earned by Dick, but the victory was enjoyed by Rick, too, wasn't it? Why? How? It's the only way that Rick got to finish that triathlon and cross the finish line with that kind of victory. It was only, of course, because he stayed connected to his father the whole way. A father who delighted to be with him.

A father who found a way to make it happen when it didn't seem possible. Listen, whatever else confuses you in this passage, don't miss our hope for enjoying eternal victory.

It is as clear, as perspicuous, as Rick needing to be connected to his dad to finish that triathlon. Our hope in our suffering is not in our own strength.

[33 : 37] It's not in our wise techniques for managing the situations. It's not even in the size of our faith or our own strength of our grip on God.

It's not. Our hope is in the victory of Jesus, who has united us to himself. United himself to us in this amazing relationship that can never be broken because he's the one that bound himself to us in love, enduring our sufferings, conquering our enemies, and achieving our victory to bring us to God, right?

That's why he did it, to bring us to God, to keep us near him, connected to him. And where is that? Where is he that we've been brought to with him? Where's God, kids?

He's in heaven. That's where it says Jesus is. He's in heaven at the right hand of God, reigning over all powers and authorities.

Think of it. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied. But no, that's not it.

[34 : 54] Our hope's not just for this life. There's a life to come. A hope that we have that is for a life eternal, a hope that's not in ourselves, but is in him.

Listen, one day, all of those warring against you right now will be defeated. One day, we will taunt death as we talked about at Easter.

You can't hurt me. You can't bring me to tears with your stings. You are defeated forever. We'll say that one day. And we will reign.

We will be more than conquerors, right? Through him who loved us. Because nothing, no powers, no suffering, nothing in heaven or earth can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus, your Lord.

Oh, Jesus, that's our hope. don't let our hearts waver and wander to look for victory anywhere else. Just as much though, Jesus, don't let our hearts waver and wonder if we have any hope anymore.

[36 : 21] our suffering can be so overwhelming at times, Lord. Our world can be so disheartening.

Our weakness can be so discouraging. But greater is he that is in us. Jesus, you are in us by your spirit.

Praise you. so no one can keep us from God. Nothing can separate us from his love. Thank you, Jesus. No one can snatch us out of our Father's hand.

May we find our hope in you today and forever. Amen. Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.