

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, give us a truly generous heart towards those who find themselves in difficulty. Because we live in a world full of distress and trouble, may we always be prepared to help those who are needy for whatever reason; and may we be generous to them in every possible way; for You have been generous to us, Lord Jesus Christ. We give You our thanks and praise; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: World Politics

Pray today for the country of China which is hosting the Olympics this year under the spotlight of world attention. Pray for truth and transparency in international affairs.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for those whose lives are threatened by bad weather*
- *Give thanks to God for your health*
- *Pray for those working in creative arts; film, music etc.*

Meditation

Live as if you know that Christ will come:

Reject the words He would not wish to hear you say;
Accept the power He gives to change you for the better.

Reject the things you do of which you are ashamed;
Accept the saving work of Christ by which you are set free!

Reject the friends you know will lead you far from God;
Accept the fellowship of those who live within the Kingdom.

Reject the thought that God does not have more for you;
Accept the path of holiness which leads you on to higher things.

Reject the world's discredited agenda for the future;
Accept the Gospel truth; the world will soon be 'born again'!

And live as if you know that Christ will come.

Bible Study - 1 Peter 3:18-22

¹⁸ *For Christ died for sins only once; the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us to God. He was killed in the flesh, but given life in the Spirit,* ¹⁹ *by which he then went and preached to the spirits in prison.* ²⁰ *These were previously disobedient when God patiently waited in the days of Noah during the building of the ark, in which a few people, that is eight in all, were saved through water.*

²¹ *This points towards baptism, by means of which you are now saved as well, not through the physical removal of dirt, but by a pledge made to God in 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 placed in submission to Him.*

Review

This is a powerful and impressive part of Peter's letter, and we will not understand it without remembering that most of it was the written form of an address to new converts who had been baptised. The whole passage is remarkable because it contains the elements of a

baptismal 'creed' which is very similar to other early Christian creeds which have since become well known in the church, such as the Apostle's Creed. What seems to be happening in this text is that Peter used the baptismal creed used by his candidates for baptism, and then in the context of his sermon, expounded one part of this creed. Remarkably, he chose to expound the one part which is most obscure to us today, which is what happened to Jesus in the period between his death on the Cross and His Resurrection on the first Easter Sunday morning!

The structure of the passage is like this. The creed is made up of verse 18, the last sentence of verse 21 and verse 22, and when written out in creedal form is like the paragraph below. When you read this you will probably see parallels with creeds and church liturgies with which you may be familiar:

For Christ died for sins only once;
The righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us to God.
He was killed in the flesh,
But given life in the Spirit,
By the resurrection of Jesus Christ
He has gone into heaven
He is at the right hand of God,
With angels, authorities, and powers
In submission to Him.

This Creed is not sufficient to account for the entire Christian faith because it does not speak about Creation, God the Father, the Church or the Holy Spirit. What it does however is to focus on the person and work of Jesus, and the work of salvation. Impressively it contains the insistence that Christ died for our sins 'only once', suggesting that the act of baptism itself was offered by the church as a 'once only' rite of acceptance into Christian fellowship. It contains a classic contrast between 'in the flesh' and 'in the spirit', which reflects the difference between worldly and spiritual things, and it ends with a climactic confirmation of hope in the ultimate authority of Christ's rule over all things in heaven. In everything, it represents the belief of a Christian for the 'present times'.

It has long been suggested that the core form of this creed was known to the converts addressed by Peter, and although he may have been responsible for writing it in the first place, he quotes it as something the converts knew, using it as a setting for giving his message. This message comes the central part of our passage, in verses 19,20 and 21.

In this central section, Peter preached a message which explains the grace of God, and addresses an issue of particular interest to the converts. In the days of the early church, people knew members of their family who died before they had a chance to hear the message of salvation, and they were concerned about their eternal fate. Peter explained using scriptural examples that in the period after His death before His resurrection, Jesus 'preached' both to 'people' and to 'spirits' (we will see the difference between these later on in the study), thus offering them salvation. This was an important point for the early Christians but it does not seem to worry people so much today, but the principles of this teaching do indeed give hope for all who have died without knowing Christ through no fault of their own, and there are many like this, even today. Peter's message is that they will hear God's Word! All in all, this passage gives us powerful reasons to give thanks to Jesus and the God of our Salvation!

Going Deeper

Clearly, we will have to look further at the two main features of this text; the sermon 'in the middle' and the creed as a whole. In each of these there are very interesting nuances which most likely reflect Peter's individual message, and it is interesting to see how it compares with what we find in the other letters of the New Testament, and the Gospels.

Notes on the text and translation

of Your love which has saved me for ever from the consequences of my sin, and lead me to trust in this great love of Yours: AMEN

- V18 *'For Christ died for sins once only' This translation differs from what is commonly found which is 'Christ suffered for sins once only.' The difference is this. The most ancient texts of the New Testament in the possession of the church around one hundred years ago had the word 'suffered'. However, in recent times a small papyrus fragment of part of 1 Peter has been found which is older than the Greek texts normally used (it is called papyrus 'p72'). Amazingly, this has the Greek word 'died' instead of suffered. How the change came about, we do not know, but clearly, the most ancient, and therefore the most likely to be close to Peter's original, is the papyrus text 'died'.*
- V18 *'to bring us to God' Most translations have 'to bring you to God'. The Greek text is definitely 'bring us to God', and I have carefully translated the rest of the sentence (which is in fact in the second rather than the first person plural) so that the whole makes sense.*
- V21 *'... but a pledge made to God in good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.' This sentence is a little obscure, and you will find this a little hard to make sense of from many translations (e.g. 'but as an appeal of a good conscience to God, , through the resurrection of Jesus Christ' NIV / NRSV). It is possible to arrange the Greek words in a number of ways to make sense of the sentence, but I have kept in mind what Peter is saying about baptism, and arrived at my translation with this in mind. Peter is probably referring to the baptismal vows made by converts.*

The Creed (part one)

You may remember that we finished yesterday's study with Peter's exhortation to the converts 'It is better to suffer for doing what is good, if this should be the will of God, than for doing evil.' (3:17). The true inspiration for such suffering is Christ, of course, and it is this thought which may have triggered Peter into using the 'creed' from which he now quotes. It begins with the redemptive suffering of Christ, and Peter emphasises four things.

Firstly, Christ died for sins 'once only'. Because of pressures in the life of early Christians, it is known that when a Christian sinned or began to act in an ungodly way, then they were excluded from the fellowship. Some believed that when this happened, then all such a person had to do was to repent of their sin and then they could be accepted back into the church again. Moreover, some suggested that in such circumstances a person should be baptised again so that their sins were washed away, again. Very quickly, the apostolic leadership of the church came to the conclusion that this was not the right way to do things. Jesus had died once for all sin, and they therefore argued that whatever policy a church had for accepting back repentant sinners, baptism was not to be done a second time.

Secondly, the death of Christ was regarded by Peter as 'substitutionary'; as he put it, 'the righteous for the unrighteous.' Peter had already set out the full nature of Christ's innocent and redemptive death in 1:18f. and 2:24f, and it is unsurprising that this is highlighted here. Jesus' death deals with people's sins in a way which none other can, because He was the Messiah and God's Son. Despite strong resistance to this idea within some churches today, no one can deny that this is central to the New Testament.

Thirdly, the death of Christ 'brings us to God' (3:18). In other words, it is effective in bringing salvation for all who believe in Him. We should never forget that the objective of our faith is to be at peace with God (see Romans 5:1f.). In the notes above, you will read that there has been some confusion in the past about whether this verse should read 'brings you close to God' or 'brings us close to God', with the current consensus that it is 'us' not 'you'. This is helpful because it gives us a feel of Peter's preaching and his personal identification both with the Jesus Christ he knew and also the converts to whom he preached. Jesus brings people together in salvation because all are brought to God on the same basis; Christ is the source of our identity and our unity.

Fourthly, Jesus was 'killed in the flesh but given life in the spirit' (3:18). This contrast does not tell us about two parts of Christ, the human and the divine, as if the human part was killed on the Cross, but the divine part of Christ was raised. No, the words 'flesh' and 'spirit' are better thought of as meaning 'of this world' and 'of God's world'. Jesus was not a man of two halves; like us, He is one being. However, because of His death and resurrection, He has experienced both this life and the next and therefore can speak to us with authority about both worldly things and heavenly things; or about the 'flesh' and the 'spirit'.

The Message

Peter's message is introduced in verse 19; 'by which he then went and preached to the spirits in prison.' What does this mean? By looking at other scriptures which speak of what Jesus did immediately after he died (e.g. Matt 12:40, 27:52f., Acts 2:25f., 13:35, Rom 10:7), we can conclude that Jesus went to Hades, the place of the dead to preach the Gospel.

Here, however, Peter says that Jesus preached to the 'spirits in prison'. It is uncertain that this can mean what most people think, because although we might think of people who have died as 'spirits', the Bible does not use the word like that anywhere. A person's 'spirit' is part of his or her being, breathed by God and making him or her into a living being. However, the Bible does use the word 'spirit' to describe a supernatural being, some of whom have fallen from grace to become fallen angels and other are 'spirits of the air' or angels who do the will of God. Amongst those who had fallen from grace were those who had fallen at the time of Noah, and it was believed in Peter's day that these spirits were responsible for the terrible fall of humanity which brought about the Flood, and this is why Peter mentions this in verse 20 as held in 'prison'. It seems that Peter first said that after His death, Jesus went to inform these of His victory; then, according to the other passages of scripture at our disposal, He proclaimed this in heaven as well. All creation was immediately told of the Messiah and the coming Kingdom of God! It is an amazing picture!

This does not, however count out the preaching of the Gospel to people who had died before Jesus' resurrection. What it does is to extend the range of the Gospel and make it clear that the Gospel is preached to all heaven and all earth.

The Creed (part 2) – from baptism to glory!

Having mentioned Noah, Peter immediately made the link between the salvation through water undergone by the world at that time, and the baptism of those he addressed (3:21). In Peter's day, there was a debate amongst Jewish people about the point at which Noah had entered the ark; some reckoning that he did so only when it came up high enough on his legs to prevent him walking around! The debate reminds us of that between Christians about how much water is required in order for a baptism to be 'complete'!

The point of baptism, says Peter, lies not in the symbolism or in the 'removal of dirt' (3:21), but in 'a pledge made to God in good conscience' (3:21). This pledge, of course, was the confession of faith made by the converts as they came for baptism, part of which would be the creed from which Peter was now speaking! This pledge or promise was made with the utmost sincerity, and people were prepared for it at length, having to learn what to say and answer for their faith. In some early churches, converts were prepared for baptism for approximately a whole year, and the promises and creeds were designed not to be forgotten!

Lastly, Peter confirmed the completion of the confession of faith which his hearers and readers would know. The victory of Jesus Christ in His resurrection meant that Jesus was raised up to 'sit at God's right hand' (3:22 see also Rom. 8:34, Eph. 1:20, etc.), and from there exercise authority over all heavenly powers and authorities. In the world view of Peter, such powers and authorities governed the lives of people on earth, so this phrase meant that he saw the ascended Jesus as able to rule all things. Peter knew that Jesus had not yet come again and that the glory of God had not yet been completed, but he

wanted God's people to be able to glory in the power and authority of Christ in whom they could have complete confidence. Jesus was victorious, so all authority belonged to Him.

Application

I firmly believe that the church today should take the whole issue of baptism more seriously. There are many churches where baptism is indeed an important ceremony and those who prepare for it are required to be ready. However, this is not always so, and in some parts of the world, people are baptised with very little preparation. The result of this is that Christians do not have the basics of faith imprinted on their minds, as something to fall back on, to remember and treasure, or recall at will. Much of this can be helped if Christian families are encouraged to bring up children in the faith and learn the Creeds from an early age, for example, and also see the things of God such as worship and communion for themselves. However, in many countries, the number of 'new' Christians with this background is minimal, and a considerable amount of work is necessary to help them learn the basics of faith. It is always best to teach converts about the things of God quickly, because the zeal of one who has been recently touched by God is considerable, and people will often be willing to give time and energy to do what God requires.

Peter's message about the preaching of Christ after His death to all the world including Hades and Heaven is also very important. Even though we have not been able to preach the Gospel to all people because of the physical, practical and sometimes emotional constraints of the world in which we live, Jesus has authority and deals with all people according to His will and judgement (see also Romans 1:18f. 2:1f.). If we are not able to trust Him to be just in all things, then surely we have lost perspective in our faith? Christ is our all and Christ is our salvation.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What 'Creeds' can you remember? What part have they played in your faith in the past, and what part could they play in your future?
2. Does the preaching of Christ after His death and before His resurrection have any meaning for you? Discuss this in your group.
3. In what ways does Jesus exercise authority in heaven and earth today?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

The creed within this passage is a powerful inspiration to all of us who read it. It is a concise set of statements about Jesus, and one which is worth writing out and learning. There is great deal for us to learn from dwelling on each part of it, and this is how this text is best used.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *If you have learned a Creed in your youth, remind yourself of it. If not, look up the Apostles Creed which can be found in most church Hymn books or service books, and learn this. If you cannot find it, it is easy enough to 'Google'!*
- *Over a period of a few days, spend a few moments thinking about each of the lines of the creed here in 1 Peter, as written above. Let God speak to you through this as He will.*

Final Prayer

Dear Jesus; some things are hard, some things are easy. Sometimes I find my way through problems, and sometimes only with difficulty. I need Your help. Give me a vision