

“Our Triumphant Savior” (part 1)

1 Peter 3:18-22

History is full of decisive military battles. One of the most important was fought in 312 AD by Constantine, putting him in control of the entire Roman Empire, which at the time had been split among rivaling political leaders. Known in history as the Battle of Milvian Bridge, it is most famous for its link with Constantine’s conversion to Christianity, which would prove to be one of the most important events in world history.

The story of what happened was told by Eusebius of Caesarea, a scholar and historian who wrote the first biography of Constantine soon after his death. He knew Constantine well and said he had heard the story from the emperor himself. Constantine was a pagan monotheist, a devotee of the sun god Sol Invictus, the unconquered sun. However, just before the Battle of Milvian Bridge, he and his army claimed to see a cross of light in the sky above the sun with words in Greek, “In this sign conquer.”

That night Constantine had a dream in which he claimed Christ told him he should use the sign of the cross against his enemies. And he was so impressed that he had the Christian symbol marked on his soldiers’ shields. When he secured the victory at Milvian Bridge, he attributed it to the God of the Christians.

This story was generally accepted for centuries, but today’s historians who are not believers in prophetic visions and dreams have serious doubts about it. Was it simple a political move?

What is not in doubt is that Constantine became a believing Christian who vigorously promoted Christianity. Up until that point, Rome and its leaders had persecuted the Christians savagely. In 313 AD, Constantine issued the Edict of

Milan which proclaimed that ‘no one whatsoever should be denied the opportunity to give his heart to the observance of the Christian religion.’ He appointed Christians to high office and gave Christian priests the same privileges as pagan ones. In 325 AD, he personally attended the Council of Nicaea, which formulated the doctrine of the Trinity. When he died in 337 AD, Christianity was well on its way to becoming the official state religion of the Roman Empire.

Constantine took the symbol of the cross and used it as an instrument to conquer and subject his enemies. While the jury is still out on Constantine’s motives, one thing I know is true—Jesus endured the suffering of the cross and through it He conquered sin.

I imagine that if you were in the position of Peter’s readers, you would have a hard time seeing how your suffering could ever be cast in positive light. I mean, really—what positive advantage could suffering ever bring about in our lives? Can pain ever truly be positive?

To help them understand how God never wastes our hurt but uses it to accomplish His purposes, Peter once more draws their attention to the sufferings of Christ, which is a major theme in Peter’s letter. In fact, the word ‘suffer’ is used at least 17 times by Peter, and the suffering of Jesus is mentioned in each of the five chapters. Here at the close of chapter 3, Peter shows how Jesus is triumphant through suffering. He was not conquered by suffering for sin, but rather He conquered sin through suffering. (Read text)

In Jesus Christ, you and I have a triumphant Savior. In this passage, Peter shows us some ways in which He is so.

1. The triumph of Christ’s CRUCIFIXION (3:18a)

“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God...”

Notice that Peter begins verse 18 by saying, “For Christ also suffered.” It is the second time in the last two chapters that he has used this phrase. Again, the suffering of Jesus is referred to by Peter in each of the five chapters of this epistle. As those who were suffering for the gospel’s sake, his readers needed to understand their pain in context.

Christians are not exempt from pain and suffering.

Whenever we suffer, it is essential that we remember the truth that Christ also suffered. And so when Peter says to his readers, “For Christ also suffered,” he is reminding his readers that they should never be caught off guard by their suffering since Jesus also suffered.

And yet sometimes, that is exactly what happens. When some tragedy hits home, it often shakes us to our core. To be sure, there are some storms in life that we can try our best to prepare for, but they still will hit us like a ton of bricks. We find ourselves wondering why God would allow such pain to come into our lives. Before such a crisis happens, you and I need to learn to find comfort in these words—“For Christ also suffered.”

Peter’s point in this passage is this—Jesus wasn’t conquered by His suffering; rather Jesus conquered through His suffering. His suffering served an ultimate purpose which was redemptive.

I want you to notice there in verse 18 just how His suffering on the cross served the redemptive purposes of God. To begin with, notice that:

It was once for all

Peter says, “For Christ also suffered once for sins.” The word translated as ‘once’ is a Greek word that speaks of something that is perpetually valid, not requiring repetition. It has no expiration date, but is good for all time.

Compare this to the sacrificial system of the Old Testament with its constant repetition of animal sacrifices. Day in and day out, there was the constant slaughtering of bulls, goats, and sheep. The lingering smell of blood and burned flesh constantly filled the temple courts, a daily reminder of the penalty of sin and the requirement of access.

Hebrews 10:1-4—“For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.”

Every day, and each year in the religious calendar of Israel when the high priest would offer sacrifices on behalf of the people, it was a reminder that their sins remained.

Hebrews 10:10-14—“...we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies

should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.”

The priests who served in the temple never sat down. The only seat in the temple was the mercy seat. They were always carrying out some kind of ritual, killing a sacrificial animal, applying its blood to the altar. Their work was never finished.

When Christ offered His sacrifice, He sat down! Finished!

It was substitutional

Peter says, “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous.” That is, the perfect took the place of the imperfect. The just took the place of the unjust. The innocent took the place of the guilty.

Not only did Jesus die for me, but He also died as me.

Substitutionary atonement means that Christ was crucified for my sin, and He literally became my sin on the cross. Jesus Christ the righteous suffered in place for me, the unrighteous. It was this truth that Passover was intended to convey, year after year in Israel’s history, going all the way back to the time of the Exodus.

In the Passover observance, God instructed His people to single out from their flocks the most handsome and healthy looking lamb. It was not to be too young, nor was it to be too old. An animal of this age would be energetic and playful, in the prime of its life.

The Lord specifically commanded that it be a lamb without blemish or spot, meaning that it was to be free from any type of defect or deformity. Such qualifications were extremely important.

Deuteronomy 17:1 — “You shall not sacrifice to the Lord your God an ox or a sheep in which is a blemish, any defect whatever, for that is an abomination to the Lord your God.”

God wanted His people to understand that they needed a perfect substitute for a perfect sacrifice. Just any old animal would not do—it had to be the very best.

Passover was to be a yearly observance for the people of Israel. Lambs were to be selected and slaughtered. By the time of the New Testament, the Jewish priests sacrificed animals twice a day in the temple—at 9am (the third hour) and 3pm (the ninth hour). These were perpetual sacrifices prescribed in the Law in Numbers 28. Innocent animals were slain every weekday, every weekend, and every feast day. This practice continued for hundreds of years all the way up until the time of Jesus.

During these ritual sacrifices, a priest would stand with a shofar (ram’s horn) in his hand in a corner of the temple, the right corner that overlooked the city. He would blow the horn to announce to the city and the priests that it was time for the offering. Standing below him, another priest waited with a knife to the neck of an innocent lamb. When the shofar blast ended, the priest would slice the throat of the lamb, and all who could hear the horn would think to themselves, “God, remember Your covenant promise to Abraham! Save your people!”

Think of the centuries and centuries worth of blood that ran from the temple courts twice a day.

Fast forward nearly 2,000 years from the time of Abraham, and 1,500 years from the time of the Exodus. On this day, many thousands of people are gathered in Jerusalem for the largest festival of the year—Passover. This one is going to be unlike any that have come before it.

As the priest assumes his position in the corner of the temple, just as he has twice a day for more years than anybody can remember, Jesus is being led out of the city. He is bloody and beaten by Roman whips and Jewish fists and can barely carry His cross to the place of crucifixion before He is thrown down upon it. Nails are driven into His hands and feet as the shofar rings out from the temple.

At the precise moment when the nails are being driven into Jesus' hands, we know that the shofar would have been blown in the temple. How? Because Mark documents the exact hour when Jesus is nailed to the cross:

Mark 13:25—“And it was the third hour when they crucified Him.”

The third hour, 9am, was the time of the first of the perpetual sacrifices that were offered in the temple. The gospels tell us that Jesus hung on the cross for six long and agonizing hours. Again, Mark says:

Mark 15:33—“And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour.”

As 3pm approached, Jesus appeared to be drawing His last breath. At the same time, a priest is climbing the corner of the temple with a shofar in his hand, and another priest is preparing to cut a spotless lamb's throat. Then, at 3pm, the ninth hour of the day, a shofar blast echoes as the Passover lambs are ritually slaughtered by the priests, and Jesus Christ, the Passover Lamb who takes away the sin of the world, lifts up His head and gives the victory cry—“It is finished!” The righteous had died in the place of the unrighteous.

All of these sacrifices, all the offerings, all the bloodshed, all the innocent slaughter, and the entire sacrificial system of Israel finds its fulfillment in Christ.

John 1:29—“Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.”

It was reconciling

Peter says, “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.” That is, only Christ can reconcile God and men.

He didn’t just die on the cross to save people from hell, but He died to open up the way of access to God. What Peter says here refutes the notion of pluralism, which says that all roads lead to God. One road leads to life!

The law and the old testament sacrificial system was a shadow, but Jesus Christ was the substance to whom it all pointed. Where it failed, Jesus succeeded. In the place of guilty sinners, Jesus died in order to reconcile those sinners to God. And He was successful!

Dietrich Bonhoeffer—*“The figure of the Crucified invalidates all thought which takes success for its standard.”*

To think of a King who triumphed through crucifixion is an absurd thought to the logic of man. Defeated criminals are crucified, not triumphant Kings. What Bonhoeffer was saying is that simply looking on, the life of Jesus Christ appears to the world as a total failure. Sure, the world will give lip service to His teachings and even see Him as a humanitarian figure. But a King who conquered through being crucified on a cross? Come on.

In fact, it was for this reason that His own people rejected Him. Their whole idea of who their Messiah was and what He would do was contradictory to Jesus’ life and ministry and experience with suffering. Their understanding of success was different than God’s. Jesus was triumphant through suffering.

It is said that Alexander the Great was not satisfied, even when he had completely subdued the nations. When there were no more nations to be conquered, he broke down and wept. He died at an early age in a drunken stupor.

Hannibal of Carthage, said to have been one of the greatest military generals of all time, who filled three bushels with the gold rings taken from the knights he had slaughtered, committed suicide by drinking poison. Few noted his passing, and he left this earth completely unmourned.

Julius Caesar, having stained his garments with the blood of one million of his enemies, conquered more than 800 cities, only to be stabbed in the back by his best friends at the scene of his greatest triumph.

Napoleon, the feared conqueror of France, after having been the scourge of Europe, spent his last years in exile.

Why do I tell you this? Because these are the men whom the world would describe as being triumphant. And if you look at all their exploits and accomplishments and compare them to Jesus, the differences are staggering:

- They had palaces, yet Jesus said of Himself, 'The Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.'
- They traveled the world, yet Jesus never traveled more than a 60-mile radius from His hometown.
- They had a host of servants, yet Jesus spent His time with 12, run of the mill, very ordinary men.
- They lived in pampered luxury, yet Jesus was taken and beaten and crucified as a common criminal.

When you look at the life of Christ from a distance, the words ‘triumphant’ and ‘successful’ are probably not the initial words you would use to describe it. Some would even go so far as to call Him a complete failure.

A rejected, crucified Savior is offensive to the world.

Richard Dawkins — *“I have described atonement, the central doctrine of Christianity, as vicious, sado-masochistic and repellent. We should also dismiss it as barking mad...If God wanted to forgive our sins, why not just forgive them, without having himself tortured and executed in payment?”*

Dawkins fails to understand the human predicament. His eyes have not yet been opened to the utter hopelessness of his situation. His mind is his own savior.

The Bible says that humanity’s problem is sin, something so fundamental to our existence, inherent within our sinful hearts from birth. And the more serious the condition, the more radical the remedy!

1 Corinthians 1:18—**“For the preaching of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”**

It is through a triumphant, crucified Savior that God has turned the wisdom of the world on its head.

1 Corinthians 1:19-24—**“For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart. Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the foolishness of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ**

crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”

If all it required to save was for God to become a Man, then the pinnacle of redemptive history would be Bethlehem.

If all it required to save was for Jesus to teach us, then the pinnacle of redemptive history would be the Sermon on the Mount.

You cannot fully understand the purpose of His incarnation and even His teaching without understanding His cross. It is only through the cross that we have a triumphant Savior. It is only through the suffering of Jesus on the cross—once for all, substitutional, and reconciling—that we can be saved. Do you want to know something else that was true of His suffering? It was unjust and undeserved suffering.

There are times that life just doesn't make sense. We suffer in ways for which there are no easy, pat answers. The loss of a baby. Cancer. Natural disasters. Random killings. When life is unfair, and you suffer because of it, how do you respond?

In response to life's hardships, sometimes a person will ask, "If God is good, if God is loving, then why is there so much evil and why do bad things happen to, at least from our perspective, good people?"

When we suffer, there are at least four possibilities:

- Suffering as the result of poor choices
- Suffering as the result of spiritual attack

- Suffering as the result of a fallen world
- Suffering as the result of doing good

Jesus suffered, even though He had done nothing wrong.

Matthew 27:3-4—“Then when Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he changed his mind and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, saying, ‘I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.’”

Matthew 27:22-24—“Pilate said to them, ‘Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?’ They all said, ‘Let him be crucified!’ And he said, ‘Why, what evil has he done?’ But they shouted all the more, ‘Let him be crucified?’ So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, ‘I am innocent of this man’s blood.’”

Luke 23:39-41—“One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, ‘Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!’ But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.’”

Luke 23:47—“Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, ‘Certainly this man was innocent!’”

The suffering of Jesus was unjust and undeserved. When you talk about unjust suffering, it doesn't get any more unjust than the cross. The greatest injustice in the history of the universe was committed against Christ. If Jesus didn't suffer

because of anything that He had done, then for whom did He suffer? He suffered for sinners—for us.

And so Peter's point in these verses is meant to encourage us in the midst of unjust suffering, or the kind of suffering that comes for doing good like Peter mentions in verse 17.

Christ also suffered, and He was also vindicated. Look at the last part of verse 18—“...*being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit.*” In other words, His suffering on the cross paved the way to future glory.

And so now, because Jesus has already walked the road marked with suffering and is triumphant, you and I can endure the hardships of life with hope and confidence. Yes, we may suffer and may even die for our faith, but Jesus has already won the victory for us.

(illus. of Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley)

Why do we think we can escape the way of the cross?

James Snyder—“*Thus, living the crucified life is not an easy proposition—in fact, it will be the most challenging thing you will ever face. The cost is certainly high. The pathway is rough. The way forward is often lonely. But the rewards you will gain of knowing God in intimate fellowship will be well worth the journey.*”

Peter wants his readers to know that they've been called to live a crucified life. They needed to view their sufferings in context with Christ's sufferings for them.

When we understand that the Christian life is a crucified life, then we'll quit making our own circumstances the object of our focus. A crucified life is no longer about you, but the One who suffered and died for you on the cross. And through His resurrection, His suffering is vindicated.

As those who trust in Christ, we too will one day be vindicated. The time is coming when God shall wipe away every tear from our eyes, and there will be no more pain.

The road the glory is paved with suffering, but know that it is short-lived. Jesus has secured victory for those who trust in Him! And so no matter what you are currently facing or will soon face, as a Christian, you can move forward with this confidence—“In all these things, we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.”

If you've never been saved, then right now in an attitude of repentance and faith, I want to encourage you to trust in Christ. He suffered and died to save you!

2. The triumph of Christ's PROCLAMATION (3:18b-20a)

“...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...”

3. The triumph of Christ's RESURRECTION (3:20b-21)

“...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...”

4. The triumph of Christ's ASCENSION (3:22)

“...who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.”