

3:8-12—FIGHTING FIRE WITH...?

The Text (NRSV)

⁸Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. ⁹Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit a blessing. ¹⁰For

Those who desire life and desire to see good days, let them keep their tongues from evil and their lips from speaking deceit;

¹¹let them turn away from evil and do good; let them seek peace and pursue it.

¹²For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer.

But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.'

What's going on here?

-v.8-9—Following the specific directions aimed at house slaves and spouses, the rest of this chapter will look at what it means generically to live as “aliens and exiles” in a Christian sense. And again, the central theme for this section is how Christians face suffering, much as it had been for the discussions in 2:18-25 and 3:1-7. Furthermore, the fact that our author now advises facing abuse with love for *all* Christians makes it clear that he sees the faithful submission of slaves and the self-giving love of Christian spouses as models for all Christians. In a very real sense, 1 Peter identifies Christians with the things that are “weaker” and powerless in the world, but his advise is never to try to gain power or strength in the ways the world will. Again, that can often sound to us like quietism that simply reinforces an oppressive status quo. But for 1 Peter, that is not the intention—rather, our author calls Christians to embody the same suffering, non-retaliating love of Jesus. That is not to endorse the injustice of the present system. It is in fact to protest it in the most authentic way there is—refusing to play by the present system’s rules. That subversive character to Christian submission is key to this whole section, as is the character of Jesus.

In fact, it may well be the very words of Jesus that stand behind 3:8-9; and even if our author does not intend to actually *quote* the historical Jesus, he does seem strongly influenced by the early tradition of the church that remembered these words of Jesus about showing love to those who persecute believers. It is significant, too, that this kind of enemy-love is connected with **blessing**, since Jesus does the same in Matthew’s beatitudes (see Matt. 5:10, especially). The idea that the people of God have been blessed to be a blessing yet again hearkens back to the story of Abraham, who is told the same about God’s promise to him. Being included in the promises and people of God gives 1 Peter’s readers a new character, one of blessing. The people of God are blessed, and in turn, they are to radiate out that same blessing to *all* (just as it has been shown to *them*) simply as a matter of who they *are*.

This is also the sense behind the clause, “It is for this that you were called.” We’ve heard already how 1 Peter sees believers as ones “called...out of darkness” and into light, but that calling is never merely a retreat from the world or the darkness in the world. Rather, the people of God in Christ are called **to** something—they are called back into the world to show love to it even when the world will not understand that kind of love. Just as Israel understood its own identity as “a light for the nations,” the people of God whom Peter is addressing are called to be a source of light and blessing for the whole world. And even when darkness threatens that light, the church is called away from using the means of darkness to protect itself. Rather, in a world that insists on demanding repayment of insult with insult, the people of God will recklessly go around defaulting on its debts of revenge, refusing to pay in kind. This is simply a part of the character of the people of God, and the quotation of Ps. 34 in vv.10-12 reinforce that idea. The ancient words of psalmist remind us that the people of God are called to pursue peace rather than vengeance.

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LOOKING FOR MORE?

The Christian tradition against retaliation is also developed in:

- **Matthew 5:38-43**—Jesus teaches returning kindness in response to abuse and love for enemies and neighbors alike, based on the goodness of God’s own giving.
- **Romans 12:14-21**—Paul takes up the same teach about non-retaliation, and like 1 Peter here, also connects this way of life with humility and genuine mutual love.

CONNECTIONS—NON-VIOLENCE, NATIONS, AND THE CHURCH

- ❖ Does non-retaliation and nonviolence as it is advocated by 1 Peter and Jesus mean that people can never stick up for themselves? What does Jesus' teaching about "turning the other cheek" and the same ideas here in 1 Peter say about abusive relationships or domestic violence? What does that teaching *not* say about living in an abusive relationship?
- ❖ How important do you see the teaching of non-retaliation to be within the Christian faith? Is this at the heart of our belief and way of life? Is this a matter of local choice or individual preference? What leads you to think as you do?
- ❖ How *practical* is a teaching of non-retaliation? On the other hand, how important is *practicality* in guiding our ethics? How important is it for the church to be *effective*?
- ❖ What would Jesus' teachings about love for the enemy mean for *nations* and their foreign policies? How would that teaching and that kind of character affect budget priorities and our use of force?
- ❖ Before we discuss how nations might be affected by Jesus' teachings about nonviolence, maybe we need to first ask the question, do Jesus' teachings apply to nation-states? What informs your answer?
- ❖ The Christian church has inherited several strands of tradition about when, if ever, it is permissible to use violence. Some rule it out all together and say that violence and war are never to be advocated by the church. On the other extreme, the church does have within its history the logic of the Crusades, which were propped up with the rhetoric of being divinely (or at least ecclesiastically) ordained. And then, in the middle are a whole host of variations on the theme of "just-war." For Luther, for example, the church was never to be in the business of using force for its own ends, but he was quite content to see princes use force to uphold the law, and in fact saw them as instruments of God to the extent that they did so. Which of these ideas appeals most strongly to you? Which seems the most faithful to the witness of the New Testament? Which seems the most likely to *work* in the "real world"?
- ❖ If Christians are called to advocate alternatives to war as means of resolving conflict, what are some of our options? What role can the church play to curb the cycles of violence in the Middle East, for example? And at the same time, how can the church advocate the protection of the oppressed (say, for the people of Iraq during Saddam's reign) without resorting to violence? Is this really possible? Why or why not?

3:13-22—THE HOPE THAT IS IN US**The Text (NRSV)**

¹³Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good?
¹⁴But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated,
¹⁵but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; ¹⁶yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. ¹⁷For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil.

¹⁸For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, ²⁰who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. ²¹And baptism, which this prefigured, 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, ²²who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

3:13-22—THE HOPE THAT IS IN US, CONTINUED

What's going on here?

Well, the first thing to say is that there *a lot* going on here. In fact, in his commentary on 1 Peter, Paul Achtemeier calls this whole section, especially vv.18-22, “the most difficult passage in the entire letter.” This is dense material, and there are many sentences and phrases packed with meaning that do not get elaborated for us as we might wish. But if we take this in chunks, maybe we can glean some of the insight that our author has for us.

-vv.13-17—These five verses are the last that really focus on the potential (and already real) suffering of the Christian community. Once we get into v.18 and following, the focus turns to the person of Christ himself. And in this section, the over all theme is not that complicated: Christians can face present troubles because those troubles do not get the last word. This helps to put 3:13 into perspective—the idea of “harm” really carries an ultimate, theological sense rather than an immediate physical one. Surely, anyone can “harm” someone for doing good at one level (although, and this is really beside the point, it is less likely that a person will be persecuted for doing what is right). But 1 Peter’s real point is that nothing of *ultimate significance* can bring the harm of separating believers from God. This is similar to Paul’s question in Romans 8:31ff: “If God is for us, who is against us?Who will separate us from the love of Christ?” And of course the answer comes that *nothing* can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. This really resonates with 1 Peter’s over-arching metaphor of being an alien and exile people—even when the world rejects or dismisses the church, its identity as the beloved and chosen people of God is non-negotiable.

It is that underlying, unchanging status of being the very people of God that gives them the ability not to fear what others fear and not to regard as final what seems to get the last word. The recurrence of the word “fear” here probably intends to bring 2:17 to mind, where Christians are told not to “fear” the emperor but only to have that ultimate awe and reverence for *God*. And because this God is the one who has given us a “living hope” and assured us of our belonging, our “fear” is not one of anxiety and terror. Again, as Paul enumerates at the end of Romans 8, there is nothing else that can separate us from the love of God, and so there is nothing that can kill our *ultimate* hope. And there is nothing that needs to hold us in the paralysis of fear. But again, that assertion is not to say that nothing bad will ever happen to believers, but rather than the troubles and rejection believers face can never make an ultimate claim on them—only God’s claim endures.

The words about not fearing what others fear in 3:14 also echoes the words of Isaiah 8:12—“Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what it fears, or be in dread.” It is also worth looking at the very next sentence in Isaiah 8:13, which seems also to have inspired 1 Peter: “But the LORD of hosts, him shall you regard as holy; let him be your fear, and let him be your dread.” This probably stands underneath 3:15 in our text— “sanctify [that is, ‘make or regard as holy’] Christ as Lord” is held up as an alternative to giving into the fears of anything else. If we are able to truly recognize that ultimate power and authority rest with God (that is, with the God who is committed to being *for us*), the power of other entities to hold us in fear is undercut. That reality gives us hope, a “living hope” as 1:4 put it.

It is precisely that same “living hope” that we are also called to offer up and share with others. This is a “defense” not in the sense of combat or aggression where the real goal is to demolish the arguments of the opponents. Rather, this is more like a defense in court, an explanation of what it is we believe and who it is that has claimed us. It is characterized more by the “Come and see” attitude of Jesus in John 1 than on beating up straw-men of our opponents’ arguments. Most important to remember about this “hope” we are to be prepared to share is that it is a *gift*. The “living hope” we possess (1:4) has been *given* to us by God through Jesus Christ—it is not our invention, nor does it rest on our ability to prove its rationality to the outside world. For that matter, since our hope is a gift, it is not up to us to ‘get people saved’ through our testimony; it may well be that God uses our experience and words to bring others to faith in Jesus, but that faith is God’s to grant and remains the work of the Spirit before it is ours. Rather, we are called to a vulnerability of faith that shares who we are—without either apologizing for our faith on the one hand or beating the ‘other’ into submission with propositions about *true* faith. Thus 1 Peter calls us to give our defense “with gentleness and reverence,” because *how* we speak says at least as much as *what* we actually say. Similarly, the way we act can either be a touchstone for the authenticity of our words, or our actions can expose our hypocrisy. As Peter puts it, when we suffer for doing right, we undo the criticism leveled against us and point once again to the hope that is in us.

-v.18-22—Now things get dense again. The initial comparison is not all that new—Christians are called to suffer for good because Christ has done the same. In fact, 1 Peter understands the passion and death of Jesus in this light; Jesus died as a righteous one, not only at

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the hands of unrighteous people, but also *for* unrighteous people—*us*. So in one sense, this passage is echoing the ideas we saw back in 2:21ff—Christ is an *example* and model of how Christians are to live and love selflessly, even to suffer for doing good.

But clearly, our author also has a sense in which what Christ has done is **not** a model for us but just the opposite—something accomplished *for* us that we no longer need to worry about accomplishing. Notice how here in 3:19-21, we get information about Christ that seems to have no direct correspondence to everyday Christian life. Believers have no access to any “spirits in prison,” whether in the present day or “in the days of Noah” (we don’t even have a very good idea of what these “spirits” might be!). This section seems to describe not a pattern for *our* conduct, but rather to describe something accomplished by Christ that is unique and unrepeatable, at least in some sense. This is the thrust of the Greek word behind the phrase “once for all” in 3:18. The “all,” which is not even present in the Greek, is not a reference to “all people” (there are other texts to talk about *that* kind of “all”), but rather to the finality of the act—it is accomplished ‘for good,’ so to speak, and is now finished. So whatever the events regarding ‘imprisoned spirits’ our author may be, the thrust is to emphasize the *objective* reality of salvation. Christ has accomplished our adoption into the people of God—it is non-negotiable and not up for debate. And once again, this means that believers can take courage as they face external persecution. While there is a real sense in which we are called to be conformed and shaped into the way and character of Jesus (and that will involve submission to suffering), there is also a sense in which our hope is grounded outside of our personal conduct and instead in the event of

the cross and resurrection. And that assurance in turn frees us to live in the pattern of Christ and to remain grounded in hope when suffering does come.

To some extent, then, the precise identity of the “spirits” and the Noah-reference in 3:19-20 is *moot*. The point of those references, probably clearer to an original audience which was more familiar with this traditional material, is clear regardless—we can have assurance for our hope despite present evidence to the contrary because Christ has accomplished salvation already. Nonetheless, it certainly is puzzling what or whom 1 Peter means by “spirits,” and then what event he has in mind here. Several suggestions have been offered. Some suggest that these are dead human beings to whom Christ preached repentance in order to save them while they were in the realm of the dead or that the Spirit of Christ inspired Noah to preach to his neighbors in his own day. Others suggest that the spirits are demonic entities to whom Christ announced their defeat. All of these possibilities, along with the host of variations that exist, have their problems. On the one hand, the word “spirits” rarely if ever refers to dead human beings (not to mention that the NT generally does not speak about the dead languishing in some limbo-like state that could be called a “prison”). On the other hand, 1 Peter 4:5 is going to assert that the gospel “was proclaimed even to the dead,” which certainly seems to make explicit what might be implicit here in chapter three. It is also quite possible that this refers to a tradition about Christ that we no longer have access to. In that case, what we *can* glean from this passage is that it drives toward the mention of baptism in 3:21, which again is given as an *external* sign of the saving acts of God. The emphasis yet again is on how the people of God can trust in their status as the beloved and precious ones of God despite the hostility and rejection they are feeling around them.

CONNECTIONS—THE VULNERABILITY OF WITNESSING

- ◆ If someone asked you what being a Christian was all about, how would you answer? What things would you say are at the heart of Christian faith? What things are secondary? What leads you to your answers?
- ◆ How do our actions witness to our faith, as well as our words? How does the *way* we tell people about our faith say something about what we believe?
- ◆ What does it look like to share your faith “with gentleness and reverence”? What examples can you think of when someone tried to share his/her faith with someone else and did it without that gentleness and reverence? How did you react?
- ◆ What holds us back from being *unapologetic* about our faith? What fears do we have about witnessing? Are those fears well-grounded?
- ◆ What is the *reason* (or reasons) to give an account of “the hope that is in you,” as 1 Peter puts it? Saving souls? Adding to the church? Correcting misconceptions? Sharing the joy you have? What reasons might have been especially important in 1 Peter’s time? What reasons are especially important for us today?