

Appealing to God for a Good Conscience

SERMON

By

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TEXT: 1 Peter 3:18-22

PROP: There is no other way to obtain a good conscience other than an appeal to God.

1 Peter 3:18-22 (ESV)

¹⁸ 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, ¹⁹ in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, ²⁰ 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. ²¹ 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, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

This text continues with the topic of suffering for Christ's sake. As we have seen submission to those in authority over us often leads to suffering because the authorities are ungodly and unjust. If we are called by God to suffer let it be for doing good not for doing evil. When it comes to suffering, there is no better example than that of our Lord who suffered once that he might bring us to God.

We certainly do not lack for examples of suffering. Righteous Noah suffered for Christ's sake by enduring the ridicule of the ungodly. No stronger language is found anywhere in Scripture concerning ungodliness than that which describes the people of Noah's day.

Genesis 6:5-7 (ESV)

⁵ The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. ⁶ And the Lord was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. ⁷ So the Lord said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them."

Even the abominations of Ahab and Jezebel did not move God to such righteous anger. Such was the sin of mankind before the flood that God was sorry he ever made them and he determined to blot them out from the face of the earth. These people were

utter reprobates. We have the record of Pharaoh who was so hardened to the glory of God seen in the plagues of Egypt that he refused to repent. But here out of all humanity God was pleased to save only eight souls. We read of Noah,

Genesis 6:8-9 (ESV)

⁸ But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord. ⁹ -- Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God.

Hebrews 11:7 (ESV)

⁷ By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.

In 2 Peter 2:5 Peter refers to Noah as a herald of righteousness whom God spared in his great mercy. The righteousness of Noah issued from his faith in the true and living God and that he should build a large boat in times when it had not yet rained demonstrates the genuine faith worked in him by his covenant God.

Admittedly, our text is very difficult and many disagree as to its meaning but it is not my purpose today to deal with those that would disagree with the view that I believe to be correct. We must understand the focus of the text, that it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil. In Noah is another example of suffering for the sake of Christ and his righteousness. Peter wants to set before us the basis for what he has said about the blessedness of suffering for righteousness. **As God vindicated Noah then, he will vindicate our practice of righteousness now.** Noah was completely justified in condemning the sins of his generation and proclaiming the righteousness of God in that God saved him and his immediate family in the ark. Though he was ridiculed for his righteous obedience to God's command to build the ark God spared his life and destroyed all the rest. So also are we justified for our obedience to God's law, which obedience issues from God's sovereign mercy in bring about our conversion. Like Noah, we are vindicated in suffering for Christ's sake in that we will be granted eternal life while all those who hate Christ and serve the devil will perish in hell forever. Because Christ suffered unjustly in our place we are able to **appeal to God for a good conscience** while all the rest stand condemned in their sin.

Peter writes,

1 Peter 3:18-19 (ESV)

¹⁸ 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, ¹⁹ in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison,

This verse is a concise summary of the gospel speaking as it does of the means of our salvation. Similarly Paul writes, "*but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.*" (Romans 5:8-9, ESV) However, Peter uses this gospel summary to point us to the basis upon which Noah was saved from destruction in the flood. The basis for Noah's salvation was the death of the righteous Lord Jesus for unrighteous Noah. Though Noah is said to be righteous and blameless in his generation and that he walked with God, his righteousness was the result of being born again by the grace of God. As a man Noah was no different than we are, a sinner in need of the blood of Christ to cover his sins.

Having a dual nature Jesus is both flesh and spirit. The Westminster Shorter Catechism summarizes the teaching of the Bible in this way, " The only Redeemer of God's elect is the Lord Jesus Christ, who, being the eternal Son of God, became man, and so was, and continues to be, God and man in two distinct natures, and one person, for ever. " The English Standard Version tells us that Jesus was made alive *in the spirit* in which he proclaimed to the spirits in prison. In the ESV we note that the word "*spirit*" ("made alive in the spirit") is spelled with a lowercase "s", indicating that it was the spirit of Christ in contradistinction to the Holy Spirit who proclaimed to the spirits in prison.

The translation you are probably using spells the word *spirit* with a capital "S" but in doing so it becomes interpretive. The Greek word translated *spirit* is not capitalized and in cases such as this it is the context that determines how we are to understand its meaning. The context does not constrain us to understand that Peter speaks of the work of the Holy Spirit although it is the work of God's Spirit to convert sinners. It is clear that before he became flesh and dwelt among us Jesus had the singular nature of spirit just as God the Father is spirit. In the days of Noah, Jesus as a spirit being, proclaimed the gospel to those who formerly did not obey. Jesus was pleased to bring only Noah and his family to himself, to convert them and bring them into obedience to his sovereign will.

That Jesus proclaimed to the spirits in prison means that he proclaimed his word to Noah, his family and to others in Noah's generation. The spirit or soul of a person is his rational, innermost being and it to our souls that all proclamation of the word of God is made. We hear with our physical ears and brains but the soul understands and discerns. It is the soul that is hardened to the gospel and it is the soul that is enabled to understand and believe. The soul that sins shall die but it is with all our heart and soul and might that we are to love Yahweh. It is the soul that waits for Yahweh and does not fret. It is the soul that

gives praise to God. **Thus did Jesus proclaim his word to Noah and through Noah to the disobedient souls in his generation.** Those souls that were made alive by the grace of God were saved in the Ark but all the rest perished in the flood.

The Ark was physical and preserved the lives of all who that were in it. But the Ark did not save the souls of Noah and his family. Their spiritual salvation or the salvation of their souls, was based on the death of Jesus the Messiah who, "*-- 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,*" (1 Peter 3:18, ESV) As Peter goes on to show, this applies to all the elect of God past, present and future. All of God's elect, including Noah, are saved by grace for it is the soul that sins and the soul that is quickened by grace unto eternal life.

Like the Ark, baptism is a physical thing and the cleansing provided by water is only external. Physical water washes away physical dirt. Therefore physical baptism cannot cleanse the soul. Rather, as Paul writes,

Titus 3:4-7 (ESV)

⁴ But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Physical baptism, therefore, is merely the outward sign and seal, "*Of our engrafting into Christ, and partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace, and our engagement to be the Lord' s.*" Our engrafting into Christ is not the result of physical baptism but it issues from the sovereign electing love of Christ applied to our souls by the Holy Spirit. Because God has set his love on us we are enabled to appeal to God for a good conscience. With the word appeal we are faced with another difference from the text that is probably before you. Your translation probably reads "*but the answer of a good conscience toward God.*" However the Greek word translated *answer* means *request* or *appeal* which refers to our approach to God for his mercy in granting to us a good or clear conscience. **Such an appeal to God for a good conscience is foundational to a right relationship to him.** Paul writes,

Hebrews 10:19-23 (ESV)

¹⁹ Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw

near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, **with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience** and our bodies washed with pure water. ²³ Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.

The quality of our assurance of salvation depends on our evil conscience being sprinkled clean by the blood our great High Priest, Jesus Christ. Because we have a soul we think rationally, we have the ability to think abstractly and can conceive of some sort of god and worship this god concept as we see fit. In addition because we have a rational soul we possess a moral conscience. But apart from conversion the god we conceive of and attempt to worship will invariably be a god of our own making and our conscience will be bound to evil. All people have a god consciousness and a moral conscience but we by nature are just like the generation of Noah. Every intention of the thoughts of our heart is only evil continually and our conscience is wholly given to evil. In other words, we are totally depraved and are completely unable in ourselves to appeal to God for a good conscience. Again Paul writes,

Romans 2:12-16 (ESV)

¹² For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. ¹³ For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. ¹⁴ For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. ¹⁵ They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, **while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them** ¹⁶ on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

The English preacher John Stott noted, "It was your great American wit, Mark Twain, who once said, 'Man is the only animal that blushes, and the only animal that needs to. We are ashamed, are we not, of things we've done in the past. Nobody is free who is unforgiven. Instead of being able to look God in the face or to look one another in the face, we want to run away and hide when our conscience troubles us.'" And it is said that, "The disease of an evil conscience is beyond the practice of all physicians of all the countries of the world."

Titus 1:15-16 (ESV)

¹⁵ To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled. ¹⁶ They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work.

Many appear to do good works yet their consciences are defiled. They wear sheep's clothing outwardly but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. Many of our friends and neighbors and even members of our family appear to be nice people, patriotic and good citizens but their consciences are defiled and in the end their good works are nothing but filthy rags. But when God in his great mercy causes us to be born again to a living hope our soul is converted and we appeal to God for a good conscience. We make such an appeal because we are now conscious of our sin. We know that we have displeased God, and we cry out to him to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Now, because we belong to Christ who bought us with his blood, he is faithful and just to pardon all our sin and impute to us the righteousness of Christ.

There is no other way to obtain a good conscience other than an appeal to God. Existentialists such as Kierkegaard held that it is spiritually crucial to recognize that one experiences not only a fear of specific objects but also a feeling of general apprehension, which he called dread. He interpreted it as God's way of calling each individual to make a commitment to a personally valid way of life. Against the traditional view that moral choice involves an objective judgment of right and wrong, existentialists have argued that no objective, rational basis can be found for moral decisions. The 19th-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche further contended that the individual must decide which situations are to count as moral situations. (Microsoft® Encarta® Reference Library 2002. © 1993-2001 Microsoft Corporation.)

That is to say, according to existentialists, the reason for guilt feelings lies in the fact that we have committed ourselves to an objective standard of righteousness such as the law of God in the Bible. What we need, they say, is to create our own subjective personally valid way of life. They say that an objective standard of righteous that is impossible to keep is the cause of our anxiety and feeling of dread. **But God tells us in his word that we must appeal to him for a good conscience.** And we will appeal to God because Christ suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God. If we suffer depression or feelings of guilt we will not find relief in a personally valid way of life. We need to cry out to God for a good conscience. We need to read the word of God and pray. The word of God applied to our hearts by the Holy Spirit provides the only lasting relief from worry and dread. In addressing himself to this issue Jesus said,

Matthew 6:25-34 (ESV)

²⁵ “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body

more than clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷ And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? ²⁸ And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹ yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. ³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? ³¹ Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ³² For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. ³³ **But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.** ³⁴ "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

May God enable each one of us to appeal to him for a good conscience. May it be our chief end to glorify God and enjoy him forever. May we indeed seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. When his people appeal to him for a good conscience he guards our hearts and minds. *"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."* (Philippians 4:4-7, ESV) Solomon tells us, *"It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives to his beloved sleep."* (Psalm 127:2, ESV)