

Mark D. Reichert

Easter 6 – 1 Peter 3:15-22 – What’s the Worst They Can Do?

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Like many others, from time to time I get a parental twinge about where this world is going for my children. The world is very different today than it was even three months ago – to say nothing of 20 or 25 years ago when I was a kid! – and it seems like my children’s lives as faithful Christians could be even harder than mine. All around the world Christians are being persecuted and even executed for their faith – more so now than at any other time in history, in fact – and while we don’t have to suffer that way here in this country right now, who knows how long it could be. The hatred and resentment over Christianity is growing all around us, and even though for now they can’t touch our bodies, our minds and hearts are more than fair game. It’s becoming more and more popular to mock Christianity and attack Christians to the point where we’ve become the enemy of progress and love and our outdated religious beliefs are really viewed more as a non-essential and even dangerous laughing stock rather than a legitimate and beneficial way of life.

Maybe that’s something you’ve experienced, or at least something you’ve seriously wondered about – especially in these last couple months with the restrictions that have been placed on our freedom to gather for worship. Or maybe actually you feel more suffering in other parts of your life – in your relationships, or your job, or your health, or your responsibilities to your family and home, or in loved ones gone too soon. If the devil isn’t attacking your faith directly, he’s coming at you through your temptations and sufferings in other parts of your lives, trying to get you to doubt God and question how much he really cares about you.

But my friends, those mind games are the only thing the devil still has left. He wants you to think that he’s in control and that God can’t keep him down. He wants you to think that he’s king in this world, that he’s the one who’s really looking out for you and who wants what’s best *for you*, and all the bad things going on around you shows that God couldn’t care less. But that’s why Peter wrote these words before us today, to show us that the devil’s power is empty and our Savior reigns. Because Jesus lived for us, died for us, and rose for us, we know that these sufferings we go through in our lives are only temporary and our life in heavenly perfection will be forever. So what’s the worst they can do? No matter what they say, no matter what they do, the worst that can happen, in the words of a famous country music song by Vince Gill, is that they threaten me with heaven. The worst they can do to me and to you is send us to our eternal reward, so why be afraid? Why be discouraged? Rather, have that calm confidence in your hearts that says, all is well with my soul because my Savior is glorified and I am baptized.

Those two things mean everything for us, and they meant everything for the people Peter was writing to as well. In those days Christianity was still new on the scene and being a Christian meant facing some pretty serious challenges sometimes, to say the least. Peter himself, only a few years after writing this letter, would be martyred for his faith and no doubt some of the people he wrote to had to suffer that same fate. In the meantime, they could be discriminated against, taken advantage of, and mistreated in any number of ways. But even in the face of so much intimidation and so many threats on them and their families, their relationship with Jesus meant more to them than even their own lives.

See, they could endure all their sufferings and being treated like dirt and all the bad things that life as God’s people in this sinful world brought to them, because their faith in Jesus Christ changed their lives and gave them hope. Those who in their hearts set apart Christ as Lord – that’s us, believers – know that if we have to suffer here in this world, it’s for our ultimate good, because that shows we’re just following in Jesus’ footsteps. The devil can try to lie all he wants about God’s love and care for us when our lives get rough, but we know that Jesus suffered the worst of hell’s torments for us in our place so that we’ll never have to, that by his sufferings he destroyed the devil and all the forces of evil, and that now God uses whatever sufferings we still go through in this world to make us stronger and bring us closer to him.

Like an athlete who puts himself through intense, even agonizing training for the purpose of getting better, faster, and stronger, God allows us to go through sufferings here in this world to make our faith in him better, to make us that much faster to share help and encouragement and support with our fellow believers, and to make our hope for heaven that much stronger. Our sufferings in this world don’t mean that God hates us or doesn’t care about us any more than a coach or therapist pushing an athlete through a tough workout must hate them or not care about them. No, the whole reason they do those things is to help them improve! In the same way, God uses our sufferings to build us up as his children and to train us all the more to appreciate everything he’s given to us and done for us.

And that’s exactly why Peter runs through this list of what Jesus did for our salvation, because he reminds us of our goal and our reward that are waiting for us in heaven when we finally put all these sufferings behind us. Peter says, “*For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison, [and] has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.*”

Here’s why the devil with all his temptations and lies and deceptions can’t touch you and has no power over you: though you were once his slave because of your sins, Christ died to pay

for those sins and take them away once and for all. Christ died to give you his perfect righteousness before God that you could never have on your own. And Christ died to fix your broken relationship with your heavenly Father, to make you right with him again, and to bring you to be with him in heaven forever. Christ emptied the devil of every bit of power he once had over his people, and he even stormed the very gates of hell and planted the flag of salvation in Christ alone for all our enemies to see and cower under. By Jesus' descent into hell to proclaim his victory – and that line we speak in our creeds is exactly what we're talking about here – our great enemy the devil has been humiliated and disgraced, and by Jesus' triumphant life, death, and resurrection, the devil has been totally and forever defeated. Now our Savior has gone into heaven and sits at the right hand of God, ruling over all creation for our good and guiding us home to himself, having thrown the devil down to the depths of the earth, stripped him of all his tyranny, and stomped him down under his feet like the weakest and lowliest of slaves.

My friends, that all means that now the devil may talk and talk and talk – he may try to intimidate us all he wants – but the truth is, he's all bark and no bite. No matter how much pain and sorrow and suffering you have to go through here in this life, know that salvation and heaven are yours because your Savior is glorified, and neither the devil nor the world nor anything else in all creation can even hope to stand against him or stop him from bringing you home to heaven.

And make no mistake about it, the devil is very much aware that he's as good as done for and that on the cross Jesus crushed his head. He knows that he can't go toe-to-toe with our Champion, but that doesn't mean he still isn't trying to fight. He may not be able to take God down, but he can still try to take God's people down. And as long as he can convince them that the Bible is nothing but fairy tales and Jesus wasn't any better than you or me, as long as he can convince them that God is an unjust monster for allowing all those atrocities throughout world history and tragedies in their own lives, as long as he can convince them that sinfulness is more fun than faithfulness, that a God of love would let you do whatever you want, or even that they are *too* sinful to ever possibly be forgiven by a holy God, the devil can still win.

And really, he's been very successful with that tactic through the years. In our world right now, there are more than a billion people who at least claim to be Christians, but that number is shrinking as churches continue to empty and in many places God's Word is on the shelf collecting dust. And really that's the way it's always been, that's the way the devil has always worked, even ever since the days of Noah when the number of believers shrank into the single digits. Here's what Peter said, “[*Christ*] went and preached to the spirits in prison

*who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water.”*

How crushing that weight of unbelief must have been all around Noah and his family! Of all the people in the world, they were the only family left who still believed, and the hostility toward God and toward the truth threatened to destroy them, too. There was so much immorality and so much opposition that God needed to act, and he did so by sending the flood to save his people and to protect the line of the Savior. By this mighty act of God all the wickedness in the world was washed away in the floodwaters and his believers were preserved in the ark and given renewed life. Even when the outlook was that bleak, just one family left on the earth, no doubt suffering untold persecution for their faithfulness, still the Lord came through for his people, stayed faithful to his promises, and brought them the deliverance they longed for.

And my brothers and sisters, the same God who through water saved Noah and his family from all their sufferings also promises to do the same for you. “*This water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.*” We are surrounded by a world of wickedness, most of all in our very own hearts, but just like in the water of the flood, in the water of baptism our Lord washes away our sin, preserves us for himself, and gives us new spiritual life. Baptism is a powerful reality that cleanses our sinfulness and so gives us that good conscience before God. Now no matter what the devil whispers in our ear, no matter how he tries to tempt us to sin or convince us of our worthlessness, we can say, I am baptized, I am God's child, and salvation is mine, because Christ is risen and the devil is powerless – God promised it and guaranteed it when that water washed over your heads! The devil can't take away our baptisms and can't take away the promises our God makes to us there, and so our baptism is our undeniable proof and rock-solid assurance that all our sins have been washed away and they're never coming back, that none of our sufferings can separate us from the love of our Savior, and that we are God's own true children now and heirs of his heavenly kingdom.

So all that really does give us hope and it really does change our lives, even in the midst of suffering. We know with certainty that whatever sufferings we may have to go through here in our lives – they might seem bad for a while, but the end result, our ultimate reward, is so much greater, and there's nothing we can be more sure of. Because my Savior is glorified and I am baptized, what's the worst they can do? Threaten me with heaven. So don't worry about the devil and don't worry about this world with all its sinfulness and selfishness and suffering and uncertainty, because Jesus lives now and forever, and believers, that means salvation in paradise is yours. Amen.