



Living Hope

Reading 1 Peter Today

Paul Barnett



Copyrighted material

In Memory of
Bruce Leslie Smith,
didaskalos

(1932-2001)

Published December 2006

© Copyright Paul Barnett 2006

Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of private study,
research, criticism or review as permitted under the Copyright Act,
no part of this book may be reproduced by any process without
written permission from the publishers.

Scripture taken from the Revised Standard Version Bible
Copyright © 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National
Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. Used by permission.

Aquila Press, P O Box A287, Sydney South, NSW 1235, Australia.
www.youthworks.net
www.publications.youthworks.net

National Library of Australia
ISBN 1 921137 63 0

Designed and typeset by Lankshear Design

In regard to (c) let these believers prepare themselves for the likelihood of a trial and determine not to resile from their commitment to Christ. Confession of Christ is an absolute, a non-negotiable duty for the professed disciple.

Jesus said that the cross that the true disciple must bear is to publicly identify himself as a Christian, and that to be ashamed of him would warrant the reciprocal shame of God on the Last Day (Mark 8:34-38). Doubtless Peter remembered his own spectacular failure when he denied Christ in the High Priest's courtyard on the night his Master was arrested, and equally that Christ graciously reinstated him on the shores of Lake Galilee (John 18:15-27; 21:15-19). Peter's appeal, 'always be prepared to make a defence' has special poignancy in his own memory.

Significantly, the believers' defence is regarding the 'hope' they have. This is the 'living hope' of an imperishable inheritance, kept in heaven (1:3-4). Evidently, the believer's 'hope' made a great impression on unbelievers for which they demanded an 'account'.

Yet confession of Christ must be offered in ways that are consistent with Christ's known character, that is, 'with gentleness and reverence' (better, 'fear'). Christ declared himself to be 'gentle' (Matthew 11:29), and to 'fear' God, that is, he acted with profound awe of the Father. Accordingly, says Peter, we are to confess Christ gently and in the fear of God never proudly or arrogantly. Peter is calling for the confession of Christ in the manner of Christ.

(iii) Peter assumes that believers will be abused, based on misinformation (verses 16-17). He insists that Christians anticipate such insults and take precise care that they cannot be accused of any misbehaviour or crime.

Perhaps they will suffer for doing good deeds, if that is God's will. Painful though this will be, it is preferable by far to suffering as wrongdoers. On the day of judgment those who accuse them unjustly will be put to shame.

Once more we see in Peter's words the silhouette of Christ in his last hours. He did 'good' and did no wrong, yet

he was reviled and suffered cruelly. Those who treated him unjustly will face the just judge and be ashamed of their actions. The same holds true for those who likewise unjustly and cruelly punish believers who are innocent of any wrongdoing.

Reflection on verses 13-17: Few Christians in the developed world are subject to persecution as Peter's readers were. Yet contemporary society criticises and rejects Christians for confessing Christ, whether in one's neighbourhood, school, university or workplace. We Christians feel pressure to water down our identity as believers and to remain silent when we should 'confess' that he is Lord and saviour.

Peter's words speak to us in our situation, even though it is different in many ways to Peter's readers. He calls on us not to be ashamed of Christ but to confess him. At the same time we are to do so humbly, as people who 'seek the welfare of the city'.

Are Peter's words 'always be prepared to make a defence' a call to engage in evangelism? The answer is, 'no, not directly'. Yet other parts of this letter do directly encourage believers to seek the salvation of unbelievers. The believers' 'good deeds' (of civic and social responsibility) are done with a view to 'winning' unbelievers to obedience to the word, something that will be apparent on the day of visitation (2:12). Here wives are the prime example of the expectation that believers will bend every effort to bring unbelievers to obedience to the Gospel-word (3:1-2). Accordingly, to resolutely confess Christ (3:15), though not in itself an act of evangelism, is inextricably connected with the sense of mission in the letter.

CHRIST'S TRIUMPH OVER IMPRISONED SPIRITS (3:18-22)

The passage following is the most difficult in the letter.

Its core message is that Christ is now victorious over the forces of evil that might bring harm to the believers. The passage, then, makes best sense when seen in a context where Peter was assuring very frightened readers that their

enemies can bring no evil against them (3:9, 13), that is, in the ultimate sense. Accordingly, let them give courageous witness to Christ, giving reverence to him alone (3:15), with no fear of their enemies.

We find the passage to be difficult for two reasons. First, Peter is using a form of exegesis that was then in vogue with Jewish Christians like him, but which is unusual to us today. They looked for events in the New Testament that corresponded with but superseded Old Testament precursors. They called the prefiguring events 'types' and the fulfilling events 'anti-types'. An anti-type 'fills the place of, or 'fulfils' a type. Thus in verse 21 we understand that the Genesis flood is the 'type' and 'baptism' is the 'anti-type', the fulfilment of the flood.

Secondly, it is not clear in verse 19 (a) who or what are 'the spirits in prison', and (b) what it means that the risen Christ 'went and preached' to them.

In regard to (a) Peter is alluding to the primeval events that preceded and necessitated the great flood (Genesis 6:1-8). A (forbidden?) sexual union had occurred between the sons of God (angelic beings) and the 'daughters of men' (ordinary women), whose offspring were called *Nephilim* (fallen ones). These *Nephilim* were the source of the appalling evil on the earth that prompted God to send the flood to wipe out all those infected with their evils. Only righteous Noah and his family were to be saved through the waters. According to popular belief God's watery judgment did not destroy the 'fallen ones', but imprisoned them for his ultimate judgment. These, most likely, are the 'spirits in prison'.

In regard to (b) the best sense (in our view) is that the slain but now risen and triumphant Christ 'went' to these evil beings and 'proclaimed' to them their imminent dethronement and condemnation.

The main alternatives to this theory are (i) Christ had preached through Noah back then, setting a courageous example for preachers now (for example, Augustine); (ii) Christ preached after his resurrection to people in hell offering a 'second chance', based on repentance (according

to Goppelt). In our view neither of these explanations fits the context in which these words appear, that is to say, terrified believers facing hostile interrogation.

By so doing Christ has demonstrated his complete victory over evil beings, whether natural (like their present persecutors - see 4:4-6) or supernatural (like the imprisoned spirits). It is possible, but cannot be proved, that persecuted believers thought they had been oppressed by some alliance between their human enemies and these superhuman 'spirits in prison'.

- 3:18 *For Christ also died for sins once for all,
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;*
- 3:19 *in which he went and preached to the spirits in prison,*
- 3:20 *who formerly did not obey,
when God's patience waited in the days of Noah,
during the building of the ark,
in which a few, that is, eight persons,
were saved through water.*
- 3:21 *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 clear conscience,
through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,*
- 3:22 *who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God,
with angels, authorities, and powers subject to him.*

There are two main teachings in this complex passage: (i) Christ was effective in his atoning death and triumphant in his resurrection and ascension to announce his victory and the defeat of supernatural powers; (ii) therefore, let baptised believers be unafraid in the face of terrifying enemies.

(i) The Christ-story runs like a thread through this creed-like passage. Christ died; Christ was 'made alive in the spirit'; Christ 'has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God'. Yet this is anything but a merely formal statement of belief. Christ is dynamic and effective in death, resurrection and ascension.

(a) Verse 18 is one of the most comprehensive statements about the meaning of the death of Christ to be found in the New Testament.

First, we note that it is preferable to translate verse 18a as 'Christ also *suffered* for sins' rather than 'Christ also died for sins'. The word 'also' picks up the previous verse where 'believers *suffer* for doing right' which in verse 18 Peter applies to Christ's sufferings. The theme of suffering is prominent throughout this letter (see 1:11; 3:17; 4:1, 12, 16, 19; 5:1, 10). Because Peter personally witnessed the 'sufferings of Christ' he can write that 'Christ...*suffered* for sins', a statement that is theologically *and* emotionally powerful (cf. 1:8).

Second, Christ's death in its effects was substitutionary and universal. It was *substitutionary* because he died 'in regard to sins', and 'in place of' others and it was *universal* because it was for the 'unrighteous', that is, all people. 'Righteous' Christ, the *unblemished* 'lamb' (1:19), 'stood in' for the 'unrighteous' in his sufferings at Golgotha.

Third, Christ's death was unique and final. The RSV translates a single Greek word as 'once for all', which points to the absolute and unrepeatable nature of Christ's death, as following texts illustrate:

The death he died he died **once for all** (Romans 6:10)

He appeared **once for all** at the end of the age (Hebrews 9:26)

Contend for the faith...**once for all** delivered to the saints (Jude 3).

Fourth, God intended Christ's death to be the 'pathway' or 'means of access' to him. Peter employs a word that was used under the Old Testament dispensation for priests having access to the presence of God in the temple. Here, therefore, it points to God's people as a 'cleansed' priesthood coming directly into the presence of God (see also Romans 5:2; Ephesians 2:18; 3:12).

In short, therefore, while Christ's sufferings appear to be the ultimate, futile, humiliation and defeat, in reality through them the unrighteous of the world find acceptance and mercy in the presence of the holy God.

(b) In verse 19 Peter writes about the risen Christ and his journey to the 'spirits in prison'. This he states minimally, using contrasting words 'flesh' and 'spirit':

Christ...being put to death in the *flesh*
but made alive in the *spirit*
...he went and preached to the *spirits* in prison.

As noted above, the view taken here is that the risen Christ went to evil and imprisoned 'spirits' and proclaimed his saving death to them, not with a view to them being given a second chance, but to inform them of their imminent dethronement and final condemnation. Noah's preaching (compare 2 Peter 2:5) gave them opportunity to repent, but they declined to grasp that opportunity.

(c) In verse 22 Peter describes the final part of Christ's 'journey' following his death, in which 'he went into heaven'. There he is at 'the right hand of God', the place of absolute authority. From that time 'angels, authorities and powers', good and bad, are 'subject to him'.

Thus verses 18-22, which speak so powerfully of Christ's death, resurrection and ascension, give the reason believers are able to 'reverence Christ' in their 'hearts as the omnipotent Lord' (3:15), for that indeed is who he is. They have nothing to fear from supernatural powers since these are 'subject' to him. How much less is there to fear, therefore, from merely human persecutors?

(ii) The first teaching about Christ proclaiming doom to the imprisoned spirits (verse 19) is inseparable from the second, that is, baptised believers have been 'saved' (verses 20-21).

Peter is drawing on the Genesis account of the Flood story in which God saved 'righteous' Noah and his family. While in the Genesis story the water of the flood was the instrument of destruction of the wicked, in Peter's (typically Jewish) exegesis God saved those eight persons in the ark, 'through water'. Thus water is the 'type' that prefigures

baptism, the anti-type that fulfils it. Accordingly Peter declares, 'baptism...now saves you' (verse 21a).

Peter, however, immediately clarifies a possible misunderstanding. It is not the water itself that saves, but that which accompanies and is signified by it, that is to say, 'the answer of a good conscience towards God, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ'. Peter is giving us a window into early Christian mission in which a person re-born through the Gospel-word would at his baptism speak of his now-forgiven conscience. That confidence of forgiveness only arose because of the death and resurrection of Christ.

Why does Peter tell this rather complex story of the flood? It must have been due to the pastoral reality in which many of these readers were frightened of the pain they were soon to face. Let them understand, however, that as genuine believers they were indeed 'saved', as his reminder of their baptisms told them. Furthermore, their majestic Lord is master of all the forces of life and death. They have nothing to fear, in the ultimate sense.

Reflection on verses 18-22: Despite its complexity this passage has a profound and important message to all believers in every situation. It is that the sufferings of our Lord in our place have saved us and brought us, forgiven into the presence of our holy God. Because Christ has risen and ascended in triumph it means that supernatural forces have no power in our lives, for they are subject to him. As well, we have nothing to fear from man so that we are free to make our good confession as disciples of Christ.

PREPARE TO SUFFER (4:1-6)

This passage concludes the section that began with Peter's question, 'Who is there to do evil²⁷ to you?' (3:13) and directs our attention (a) to those who do the evil (verses 3-6), and (b) believers who suffer under the evil (verses 1-3).

27. RSV translates 3:13 as 'Now who is there to harm you...?' which doesn't quite capture the force of the original Greek kakoo, 'do evil'.

Peter has just declared that the crucified, risen and ascended Christ has gone victoriously to the right hand of God with 'angels, authorities and powers subject to him'. This triumphant Christ is now 'ready to judge the living and the dead', including those who 'do evil' to believers.

Peter makes two contrasts: (a) between *flesh* and *spirit*, and (b) between the *past* and the *present*.

The first (a) is *spatial* contrasting human existence *down here* (flesh) with God's world *up there* (spirit).

spirit	God's world
flesh	Humanity's world

The opposites 'flesh' and 'spirit' pick up the earlier reference to Christ who was 'put to death in the *flesh*' but who was 'made alive in the *spirit*' (3:18) where he paraded his dominance over '*spirits* in prison' (3:19).

Peter continues this 'flesh versus spirit' contrast in verses 1-6, but now as it applies to humanity. God's purpose in sending the Gospel to men 'in the *flesh*' (including the wicked who persecute) is positive, that is, that they will 'live in the *spirit*' according to the will of God (verse 6). In short, Peter looks for them to be re-born and live ethically.

The second contrast (b) is *temporal* contrasting former wicked lives of the readers before re-birth through the Gospel-word with their present lives that are under persecution.

Past | Present

'the time that is past' | 'the rest of the time'

Peter repeatedly contrasts their re-born present with their wicked past (for example, 1:14, 18; 2:9).

We note that the spatial and the temporal contrasts are connected, and the connector is the Gospel. The Gospel separates the wicked past from the godly and penitent present; the Gospel is the 'high speed lift' out of 'the *flesh*' (the sinful world) up to (the world of) the Spirit (God's holy presence).