“Totally into Jesus”

Robert M. Thompson, Pastor
Paul A. Cummings, Associate Pastor

Corinth Reformed Church
150 Sixteenth Avenue NW
Hickory, North Carolina 28601
828.328.6196 corinthtoday.org


I have a clear conscience because of Jesus. I want a clear conscience when I see him.

1 Peter 3:13-22
June 7, 2020

(Available in print form at corinthtoday.org/sermons or by audio at 828.328.6196.)

Christ our hope – Pastor Paul

My wife, Danielle, and I had fun this past fall watching our youngest daughter win the North Carolina state doubles tennis championship. At the beginning of the year, she was paired with last year’s state doubles champion. We watched them slice through our conference and regionals championship without losing a set, ever. Then we got to the state championships. As they were seating us, we realized “Hey, we are at the state championship. Do you think we might be able to win?”

We let this little bit of hope start building in us but then other things begin to creep in. We looked around and thought “Anything is possible. What if one of them gets injured? What if our girls just have a bad day? What if they just play someone that is way more amazing?” Once again, they did not lose a set and won the state championship.

1 Peter 3 is talking about the same kind of thing. We had this hope that was beginning to grow but then it was tempered by other things. But the hope we have in Christ is not tempered by anything. Jesus is never going to be weakened by something. Jesus is never going to have a bad day. Nothing that will happen is stronger than Christ. Christ is supreme and eternal, and he gives us this hope.

Hope is essential. Here in verse 15b, we see that hope is not just essential but that we must know how to explain why we have this hope and invite others into it. The setting for this hope is persecution. When everything is rosy and everything is wonderful, we tend not to think about hope. But when things aren’t going our way, that’s when we need to cling to hope.
**Resurrection hope – Pastor Paul**

**Blessed**—Verse 13 is actually not hyperbole. It’s not sarcasm either. It’s actually a very simple, general truth that Peter is saying, and it resonates back to 1 Peter 2:15 “For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people.” We also know, however, in this world that it’s not how it works. In this world when we do good, quite often we are paid back with evil. That’s actually Satan’s operating method—“When I see good, I will pay it back with evil.”

In verse 14, we see not if you are going to be persecuted but when. When you are persecuted, God is with you and you are blessed. The word ‘blessed’ is actually the same word that Christ uses in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:3-11 and in the beatitudes.

Peter then says “Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.” That is the same wording that comes from Isaiah 8:12-13: “Do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it.” You may face the same problems that the world faces but the believer faces those problems with someone else in their corner. With access to someone else. Through the power of someone else. And that power we know is Christ. You have someone on your side that the world does not.

**Worship**—Verse 15a says “But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord” but that comes after saying “do not fear” in verse 14. “Do not fear” then leads you to worship. The word fear in verse 14 in the Greek is actually ‘storm tossed’. Being in a boat that is being tossed about. If you look at Matthew 14:22-33 after Jesus walks on the water and calms the storm, the disciples in worship say “Truly you are the Son of God.”

So instead of fearing, worship God. Peter is telling us not to just say that Jesus is Lord but to live like he is Lord. Don’t just let it be words. Let your lives of worship mirror the fact that there’s truth that Jesus Christ is Lord and there is none like him and none can compare.

**Hope**—Verse 15b is a favorite verse of apologetics. The word comes to us from apologia. It is the explaining of our faith in defense of our faith. Apologetics is not being great at learning how to say you’re sorry. This verse is talking about hope—always be ready to give a reason for the hope that you have. Hope is not to tied to hope. Hope is tied to evidence.

Sometimes we just have this hope. Someone might ask, “Why do you have that hope?” And you say “Why I just hope.” That’s like having one balloon tied to another balloon and thinking that the one balloon will keep the other balloon from flying away. They are both going to fly away. What do you do if you want to keep that balloon there? You tie that balloon to something that isn’t going anywhere. And that’s what this is talking about. You have this hope that’s not tied to anything but you have this hope that is tied to evidence. And that evidence can be searched and known and also leaves a trail for other people to follow.

**Truth**—Verse 16 is the part that doesn’t get near as much publicity as verse 15. Why? Because we just love to win an argument. Think of a discussion or heated debate with someone who doesn’t believe in the Lord or someone who is anti-Christian. You might ask “What if they are mean? What if they are name calling?” I can remember having these conversations with my mom and dad about kids.
on the playground. “But what if they do this? What if they do that?” My mom would just look at me and say “So. Are you that? Does it matter?”

Peter would say the same thing. We don’t respond to things the way the world does. We take Christ’s line on everything, and we are Christ in those situations. It does no good for us to win an argument but lose the person. The goal is to win the person not the argument. We are not called to just play angry ping pong with people. Aren’t we called to engage people with passion, truth, and purpose? Absolutely, but to disagree in an agreeable manner and in a non-mean spirited way.

In verse 17 there’s this other incredible concept that Peter wants you to grasp. It starts out “For it is better, if it is God’s will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.” The great concept he is trying to get you to grasp is this—there are things in this world far beyond what this world can handle. There is a different kingdom. There is an unseen world that is greater, and it’s the kingdom of Christ. If you are called to suffer, it is greater because it far outweighs anything in this world.

As we struggle in America with racism and inequality, I want to tell you something sobering. We have hope but will this generation solve this problem of racism? The sobering answer is no. We will not solve the problem of racism any more than we will solve the problem of all sin in the world. It’s not going to happen on this side of eternity.

So when they look at the church and ask why do you have hope. Why do you have hope about anything? If we can’t solve this and move past it, what hope is there? People pray about peace in the Middle East but say it’s impossible for us to have peace there. We always come back and say but it is always possible for there to be more peace than there is.

And so in the same way, why would we work to end racism? Why would we work for there to be reconciliation? Why would we work for there to be equality or healing when we can’t solve the problem of sin in this world? We work because Christ is not in the tomb. If Jesus Christ can conquer sin and death, then through His power we can work in that power to bring about healing. We can work to bring about the resurrection of the church together as a unified body. We can work for reconciliation because we have hope not based on hope itself but based on the truth that Christ lives and that our lives are found and given purpose through him and him alone.

Our baptism and his descent – Pastor Bob

When Peter writes in 1 Peter 3:15, “Always be ready to give an answer for the hope that is in you,” he’s not saying, “Always be ready to answer any question from any person about any subject or any Bible verse.” That’s a good thing, because some Scriptures are hard to understand and explain. 1 Peter 3:18-22 is among them. Martin Luther wrote of this text, “I do not know for a certainty just what Peter means.” I’ll do my best, but I’m quite sure I will not answer all of your questions!

I find encouragement on that subject in 2 Peter 3:16, where Peter himself said that the Apostle Paul’s “letters contain some things that are hard to understand.” Remember that Peter was one of the original Twelve and preached the very first Christian sermon ever. So if he gets a little perplexed studying what we call the New Testament, it’s OK that we do.
Before we get to 1 Peter 3:18-22, let’s talk about baptism. It’s a shame that when Christians talk about baptism we focus on our differences. Baptism is designed by God to unite us. All Christians agree that baptism is about water, because water is an agent of cleansing. Think about that dip in the pool on a hot day or a drink of water when you’re dehydrated. Water cleans, refreshes, and restores.

Water baptism for all Christians represents God’s grace, because only God can clean you up. Baptism represents your initiation into this exclusive group we call the church. For some Christians that’s why you have to wait for baptism until you can make your own decision to trust Christ, but for other Christians that’s exactly why we baptize babies. When you bring a new child into the family, you don’t say, “You don’t really belong here until you can decide for yourself.” From Day 1 you want that little one to have the deep sense of security that says, “I’m known and loved here.” That’s what infant baptism is all about. But don’t focus on the argument. For all Christians, baptism symbolizes belonging.

Water baptism symbolizes being “totally into Jesus.” You may hear that phrase as your commitment to him, but I want you to hear it as God’s commitment to you. As the Apostle Paul says, “Don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” (Romans 6:3). Jesus was baptized, and so are you. Your baptism connects you to him and to every other person who belongs to him. Your baptism connects you symbolically to everything about Jesus. When he died, you died. When he rose, you rose. Since he lived a sinless life, your water baptism symbolizes the fact that in Christ you too have been washed clean, born again. God himself has declared you “totally into Jesus.”

With that background, we can understand 1 Peter 3:18-22 better. Peter reminds you of key parts of Jesus’ story that include you. Remember that Peter is writing to suffering, isolated Christians. What does it mean to them to be totally into Jesus?

In verse 18, Jesus died for your sins. There’s no statement more common or basic or critical to Christian faith. Christ “suffered once for sins,” as opposed to the endless repetition of sacrifices in the Mosaic system. “The righteous for the unrighteous,” Peter continues. You’ve heard the phase, “You clean up good.” Beautiful, perfect Jesus cleaned you up good and made you look just like him in the eyes of God. “To bring you to God,” Peter adds. What other hope did you have to have a relationship with God?

Peter then adds a striking and really important phrase. “He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit.” In my view, “Spirit” shouldn’t be capitalized, as it is in the NIV. In your mind, go back to the cross. What Peter is saying is that when Jesus died, his body and spirit were separated. His body died and his spirit lived on.

In verses 21-22, Peter turns to Jesus’ resurrection and ascension—again, for you. Where is he now? He is “at God’s right hand—with angels, authorities, and powers in submission to him.” Even when the world seems out of control with plague and hatred and chaos, Jesus is still in charge. Peter’s readers need reminders of all this. If you suffer unjustly, Jesus has been where you are. At the end of his story he rested in power and glory. In that position of glory and power he’s interceding for you, watching over you, waiting for you to join him. You have been brought totally into Jesus, which means you’re already living in the victory over sin and death that he has won. Take heart.
The part of this passage that confuses people is in verses 19-21, and especially verse 19. What does Peter mean when he says, “After being alive, he (Jesus) went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits?” I’m going to give you my opinion, but confess that Christians disagree about what this means. What I’m getting ready to say is mostly borrowed from a theologian named Matthew Emerson, and I’ll give you links to a podcast where he was interviewed and his book on this subject in my sermon manuscript. Special thanks to Kevin Watkins for recommending this excellent book.

Notice the sequence of what Peter says. Jesus suffered, then was put to death but his spirit was made alive, then he preached to spirits in prison, rose again, ascended, and sits at God’s right hand. In context, then, when Peter talks about preaching to the spirits in prison, he’s talking about Jesus’ “intermediate state.” Where was Jesus between Friday afternoon and Sunday morning? His body lay in the tomb, but his spirit went . . . somewhere. Peter says that “somewhere” was a place where there were “imprisoned spirits.”

Matthew Emerson notes that in the cosmology of Jesus’ time the “place” of the dead has compartments—one for the “righteous dead” (aka “Paradise”) one for the “unrighteous dead” (aka “Hades” or “Sheol”) and the lowest compartment (Tartarus) for fallen angels. We’re not talking about a physical place under your feet. But Jesus went to them.

Why did he go there? To preach! To proclaim that he had survived death, defeated death, died with a purpose to suffer for sin, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us to God. That was really good news in Paradise. Not such good news in Hades. And terrible news in Tartarus. When Jesus took his last breath on the cross, the evil spirits erupted in a gleeful victory dance with high fives all around. Jesus shows up and the place is hushed. He proclaims victory to them.

The New Testament speaks about this more often than you probably remember.

- “The Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matthew 12:40).
- “You will not abandon me to the realm of the dead” (Acts 2:27, quoting Psalm 16).
- “What does ‘he ascended’ mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions?” (Ephesians 4:9).
- “‘Who will descend into the deep?’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead)” (Romans 10:7)
- “… that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth…” (Philippians 2:10, emphasis added)
- “I was dead, and . . . I hold the keys of death and Hades” (Revelation 1:18).

When we say in the Apostles’ Creed that Jesus “descended to the dead,” this is what we mean. He went to the place where spirits—disembodied humans as well as evil spirits—were waiting. He went there to proclaim victory, and from then on there would be no more waiting—for anything.

The reason that matters is because it has a lot to do with what happens to you after you die but before your resurrection. It has everything to do with your loved ones who are with the Lord. Jesus changed the meaning of death that Friday afternoon. Where do you think Bob Spuller or Maxine
Warren are right now? Or Mike May or Doug Leatherman? Or C.C. Houck or Luke Garrison or Jake Robertson? Or George Floyd or Martin Luther or C. S. Lewis? Or my Dad or your grandmother?

For the believer, death died on Good Friday, even before Easter Sunday. When Jesus died and descended to the dead, death lost its chokehold on the human race. From that time on, the intermediate state for the believer was transformed into the place of joy in God’s presence. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. The spirit of our loved ones are with Jesus, who already has a resurrected body that they will one day share as well with us.

A Clear Conscience

Did I answer all your questions? No. I told you I wouldn’t. But it’s in this context that Peter makes the statement, “This water symbolizes the baptism that saves you.” He doesn’t say that water baptism saves you. He says that the water symbolizes the baptism that saves you.

The real baptism is a transaction between you and God. It’s the fact that God has brought you totally into Jesus, cleaned you up good inside. The end result is “the pledge of a clear conscience toward God.” This helps me so much deal with the current national crisis and conversation surrounding the death of George Floyd and countless others. There are two primary effects.

First, because I have been declared totally into Jesus, I have a clear conscience. I’m free of guilt—from God’s perspective. That truth frees me not to be defensive when someone says, “As a white person, you’re part of the problem.” I am. I am secure enough in Christ to say so. In the same way that my sins put Jesus on the cross, my sins put a knee on George Floyd’s neck. I can pray prayers of corporate confession along with Nehemiah and so many others in the Bible. I am totally free to admit my sins and the sins of my people because the ultimate guilt has been paid for. I need to do that because it brings healing during a time of great division.

But there’s a second result for me. I not only have a clear conscience, I want a clear conscience. I want to be able to meet Jesus and know that I gave my life to what matters most to him. Justice matters to him. Peace matters to him. Life matters to him. Every life matters to him. Black lives matter. Blue lives matter. Unborn lives matter. Forgotten people in prisons and nursing homes matter. Whose life doesn’t matter to the one who gave his life to bring us to God, the unrighteous for the righteous? How could I ever think that my privileged life makes me better than or more worthy of humane treatment or opportunity to thrive or the benefit of the doubt?

I want a clear conscience that I lived in such a way that it made Jesus look so good that somebody asks, “Where do you find such hope?” How can you keep your faith in God and treat people with such compassion and grace whether you think they have been wronged or whether they are wrong? I want God’s grace in me to create thirst.

Water baptism, when we experience it or witness it, brings us back to the basics. We belong because Jesus brought us totally into him. The sacrament of communion has the same purpose. We have to be reminded frequently of Jesus’ body and blood. The deeper we go into the grace that freed us from our sins, the more we live a curious life of hope with a clear conscience. Amen.