

Dead Men Don't Sin

I Peter 3:8-4:6
David H. Roper

Before we get into new material, I would like to review and amplify what we covered last time. The argument of this rather long section actually begins with verse 8 of chapter 3 and continues through verse 11 of chapter 4, and it is necessary to understand the introductory portion of this passage quite well in order to understand the remainder.

Remember that Peter is summarizing some of the great principles he has already outlined -- principles which ought to govern Christian living in "impossible" circumstances. He begins,

To sum up, let all be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil, or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing.

The first characteristic of every believer is that he ought to be gracious and forgiving, Or, to put it another way, he ought to be loving - even if his love is unrequited. Even if his love does not evoke a positive response, the Christian is to be gracious and forgiving, "not returning evil for evil, but giving a blessing instead." The second characteristic is found in verse 14:

But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. And do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled, but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts . . .

The second characteristic is courage. Do not be intimidated, do not be frightened, but give Christ his rightful place as the Lord of the universe. He is in control, and therefore we do not need to be intimidated when people oppose us. The third characteristic is found in the last part of verse 15:

. . . always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet in gentleness and reverence . . .

This refers to Christian's witness. "Be ready to defend the hope that is in you." We must not be personally defensive, and certainly not intimidated by those who oppose us, but rather, we should be able to give a calm, gracious, reasoned explanation for the hope that is in us. The final characteristic is in verse 16:

. . . and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.

As we saw last time, there are two ways by which we can have a good conscience. One is to obey the truth. The other is to deal with sin -- confess it, and receive cleansing and forgiveness when we have failed to obey the truth. Both ways will secure a good conscience. So these are the four qualities of life that Peter says ought to characterize us, no matter what our circumstances are. We ought to be loving to be courageous, to be forthright in our witness, and to have a good conscience.

But who of us is able to maintain that sort of behavior in difficult circumstances? Peter goes on to review for us the resources that we have in Christ, as a result of his death, burial, resurrection, and ascension. Note the expression in verse 18:

For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit . . .

And in verses 21 and 22:

And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you - not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience - through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him.

The key to this section is found in verse 17:

For it is better, if God should will it so, That you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong.

"It is a better thing to suffer when you are right," he says, and then he cites the example of Jesus, who suffered the ultimate injustice in order to bring us to God. He solved the fundamental problem of humanity: How can we know God? Jesus solved that problem by dying for us. And he was put to death not only in the flesh but in the spirit as well. He does not say Christ was "kept alive in the spirit," he says He was "made alive in the spirit." In other words Jesus went all the way in paying for our sins. He not only died physically, he died spiritually, and experienced separation from God.

This is the explanation for Jesus' words on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Now, he knew why, because he knew that the Psalm from which that cry was taken goes on to imply that God is too holy to look upon sin. Jesus knew that God forsook him because he had become the sin-bearer. The Gospels tell us that when Jesus was in the Garden awaiting the cross he began to be very troubled. The Greek term is "*ademonco*." Our words "domicile" and "domestic" come from its root. It means "away from home". He began to feel homesick, because for the first time he experienced the displeasure of the Father. He had enjoyed a life of perfect and unbroken communion with the Father up to this point. But when he became the sin-bearer, the Father began to withdraw, and the Son began to be homesick. He was deeply troubled. He knew that he was being forsaken and would experience that ultimate separation from the Father which is Hell itself. In other words, Jesus went to Hell.

In order to understand this concept, we need the biblical explanation of Hell. One problem in discussing this matter is that our vocabulary is seriously limited. Almost all our expressions imply time and space, but when we talk about eternity, none of these terms are applicable. The Bible describes Hell in terms of relationship rather than place. I do believe Hell is literal and actual, don't misunderstand me. But the emphasis in the Scripture is not on Hell as a place, but rather on Hell as a broken relationship which makes existence "Hell." Hell is existence apart from God. Hell is Hell because God is not there. Heaven is Heaven because God is there. Turn for a moment to 2 Thessalonians, chapter 1. Paul is describing the second coming of Christ, and beginning in verse 5 he says,

This is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering. For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

And note verse 9:

And these will pay the penalty of eternal exclusion [The New American Standard Version reads "destruction," but "exclusion" is the better word.], **away from the presence of the Lord and for the glory of His power . . .**

They will be excluded from the presence of God and the glory of his power, and that is what Hell is. You see, it is the presence of God which makes life worth living. All the qualities in life that are worthwhile come from God. He is the Giver of every good and perfect gift - love, friendship, creativity, art, music, companionship, comfort, laughter, humor, joy -- all these come from God. And when God is absent, they cease to be. We have never experienced that in this life -- no one has -- not even men and women who do not know God. Because God is still

present, and he freely imparts himself -- even to those who despise him. Every bit of joy and laughter we enjoy is ours because God loves us and freely gives himself to us -- even if we rebuff him.

But there will come a time in life -- if a person refuses to acknowledge the presence and the power of God, and wants to live without God -- when God will give him what he wants. And he goes out into eternity without God without his presence, and away from the glory of his power. There is no light there, no joy, nothing worthwhile. But the people there have precisely what they demanded. If they insist on their own way, God will let them have it, and thus they experience exclusion from the power and the presence of God. Rightly understood, then, Hell, in some strange way, is a provision of the love of God. If men do not want God, he will not compel them to have him; he will let them go. We can experience some measure of that now. We can experience "hell on earth" if we choose to do so. But never completely. That only comes at death, and then that separation is irrevocable, eternal.

That separation from God is what Jesus experienced -- not eternal separation, in terms of our time frame, but he went to the very extreme. He did not, in the modern idiom, "cop out"; he went all the way. He experienced the weight and the burden and the guilt of sin. And he bore that not only to the cross, but he bore it beyond the cross into separation from the Father. He experienced Hell.

But the passage does not stop there. God did not leave him there. In Psalm 16, in anticipation of this event, David wrote,

For Thou wilt not abandon my soul to Sheol (Hades); Neither wilt Thou allow Thy Holy One to see the pit (undergo decay).

Peter uses that same passage in his sermon recorded in the second chapter of Acts. His argument is that this obviously is not David speaking, because David did see corruption -- "his tomb is with us to this day." David was prophesying about Messiah, about Jesus. And God did not abandon Messiah in Hell -- he took him out. Jesus was raised from the dead, and he ascended to the right hand of the Father, where he is in authority over principalities and powers.

Similarly, Peter says that baptism now saves us. You see, Jesus was saved. The Father took him out of Hell. "And," Peter says, "corresponding to that, baptism now saves you . . ." This is not a reference to the rite of water baptism. "Baptized" means "placed into." Water baptism is a symbol of being placed into Christ -- into his death, burial, and resurrection. Peter says that the reality of this symbol is our identification with Christ. When we trust him as our Lord and Savior, we are placed into his death, his burial, his resurrection, and we ascend with him so that we are "seated in heavenly places with Christ Jesus," and nothing can harm us! Not the hassles of the present nor the habits of the past. Because, you see, dead men have severed their ties with the past. Sin cannot dominate them. Peter says that baptism, our identification with Christ, causes us to go through precisely what Christ went through, and we are raised -- as he was raised, to a brand-new life.

What better illustration is there of this than the ark? Noah lived in a world which was becoming increasingly wicked and wretched. Men were living in opposition to themselves and God. Out of the midst of this terrible situation, God called one man -- Noah. Noah found grace in the sight of the Lord. He was told to build an ark, and to be a preacher of righteousness -- to declare to the world that judgment was immanent. Noah set about building the ark and preaching. Men did not listen. There were few who went into the ark. That is why Peter mentions the number -- eight only a few responded to Noah's call. The Flood came, the winds blew, the waves beat on the ark, but the ark was carried safely through. Though the ark experienced all the judgments of the Flood, Noah and his family were safe and secure and warm and snug inside. And one hundred fifty days later, Noah and his family stepped out onto dry land. When they did, they stepped out into a new life, a brand-new life the past was gone!

Peter says that is the illustration of our experience. Jesus is the Ark. When you believe him, you are placed into him. You experience what he experienced. All the judgment of God falls upon him, and you are carried safely through. Paul says, "Therefore, if any man is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things are passed away; behold, all things are becoming new."

In our last study the question arose, "Who were these spirits that Jesus preached to?" mentioned in verse 19:

. . . in which [That is' "in which spirit" -- a reference to his human spirit, as we established last time.] also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah . . .

Here is a class of individuals designated "spirits now in prison" who, during the time of Noah were "disobedient" and thus were "imprisoned." Who are they? Let us go back to the sixth chapter of Genesis:

Now it came about, when men began to multiply on the face of the land, and daughters were born to them, that the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful; and they took wives for themselves, whomever they chose. Then the Lord said, "My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, because he also is flesh; nevertheless his days shall be one hundred and twenty years." The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men, and they bore children to them. Those were the mighty men who were of old, men of renown.

Here is a class of individuals called "the sons of God" and another class called "the daughters of men." There was a union between these two, and the result was the birth of the "Nephilim." The Hebrew word means "fallen ones." They appeared before the Flood violent men who raged across the earth and also afterward, and were the forefathers of the giants encountered by the children of Israel when they went into the land of Canaan.

Who are these "sons of God?" And who are the "daughters of men?" There are some who believe that the sons of God were the descendants of the godly line of Seth (whose generations are given to us in chapter 5), and that the daughters of men were women descended from the godless line of Cain (whose generations are in chapter 4), and that this mingling of the godly and ungodly lines resulted in the Nephilim. The problem is that this does not explain the pre of the Nephilim. These were more than mere men; they were supermen. They were men of renown, violent, powerful, extremely clever men who ruled the earth in those days. I believe they gave rise to the stories of "demigods" in Greek and other ancient mythology. You cannot explain the existence of such men merely on the basis of marriage between two groups of human beings classified as to their morality.

Another problem is that in the Old Testament the term "sons of God" almost always refers to angels. For example, in the book of Job when the "sons of God" are called into God's presence to give an account, it is clear that they are angels. And later on the Lord asks Job, "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" Again, this must be a reference to angels. And in Daniel there is an unmistakable reference to angels called "sons of God." To the Hebrew mind the sons of God were angels. Now, we are sons of God, too, in the sense that God is the father of all spirits. But in the Old Testament the term is normally used for angels. These, then, were fallen angels, evil angels, demons, who cohabited with women of that day, and the result was the Nephilim, who were judged in the Flood.

The Nephilim died in the Flood. The demons were imprisoned in Hades. And it was to these demons that Jesus preached, proclaiming victory. He proclaimed it by his resurrection. That was the strongest proclamation of victory which could have been made. He was the victor; he won. When Noah arrived at the end of the period of judgment and stepped out of the ark, the past was entirely gone. There was a new beginning. The Nephilim now were dead; they were no longer a threat to Noah and his family. These giants who stalked the earth were gone. All of the wicked men who had opposed Noah's preaching were gone. And the demons that had invaded the human race were imprisoned. So the old life was totally gone! There was a new beginning, a fresh day.

This is what Peter is saying to us. Every day in Christ is a new and fresh day, as long as we are in the Ark. The habits of the past, the giants that used to tyrannize us, are gone. The demonic forces that prevailed in our life have been judged, and we have a whole new life. "If any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come." But that is true only if we are in the Ark. That is true only if we are resting in what we are in Christ. If we stop trying to solve our problems ourselves, and we rely upon the capacity of a

risen Lord to live his life through us, then we are victors, as he was the victor.

Many of you are undergoing difficulty as a result of the present judgment upon our nation. Because of the economic situation, your jobs are in jeopardy. Some of you have lost your jobs. That is a terrible threat. And yet, if you are in the Ark, you are secure. Many of you are struggling in your family situations, and you do not know what to do with your children or your wife or your husband or your parents. But you are secure if you are in the Ark, if you let the Lord himself take the buffeting, take the pressure upon himself.

This past week my wife, Carolyn, and I have been saying to each other when we get ruffled, "Are you in the Ark?" Midway through the week she was a little troubled about something, I said, "Are you in the Ark?" She said, "No, I'm treading water!" That is what we all are inclined to do. That may be all right for a while, but you cannot tread water for a hundred fifty days no one can. If you feel you are going under -- the water is beginning to close over your head, and you know you cannot sustain life any longer -- just get in the Ark. That is where your safety is in your identification with Christ. Let him fight for you. He has already won the battle.

In chapter 4 Peter goes on to develop his argument. He begins with a conclusion to what has gone before. When you see the word "Therefore," it almost always indicates a conclusion.

Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same thought
[Not "purpose," but "thought." "Think this thought."], **because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin . . .**

What does Peter mean, "He who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin?" Does he mean that suffering has some purifying effect on us, that it purges us from sin? Well, there is truth in that. Suffering does have that effect on us. But that is not what Peter is saying here. He is not referring to the consequences of our actions, but to the consequences of Jesus' actions. Jesus suffered for us. He went through death, burial, and resurrection for us, and now sin has no dominion over him. Dead men do not sin.

And we are to arm ourselves with the same thought: Since we are in Christ, we too, have died. We have died to the old life, the flesh that used to dominate us. It no longer has control over our life. We are free from the power of sin. And now we have been raised to a new kind of life, free from guilt and impotence. Peter says arm yourself with that thought. When you are tempted to give way to some habit, when a giant makes a strong appeal to your life, when you have been treading water too long and you begin to go under, arm yourself with that thought. Get in the Ark. identify yourself with Christ.

. . . so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.

Do you want to pursue the will of God? Do you want what he wants in your life? Then this is the way to obtain it. Get in the Ark It is interesting that Peter contrasts "the lusts (or passions) of men" two nouns, both plural -- with "the will of God" two nouns, both singular -- one will, one God. That is the secret to unity and integration in your life. Instead of being driven by the passions of men (and they change daily -- you must check Playboy Magazine to see what kind of cuff link is cool this week), you can be controlled by the will of God. You do not have to be controlled by the passions of the world. But being controlled by the will of God occurs only as you are in the Ark, and you find the security and the strength which comes from that relationship.

Peter says in verse 3,

For the time already past is sufficient for you to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousals, drinking parties and abominable idolatries.

He is contrasting the time which is past with the rest of the time. "From now on, you do not need to be controlled by the passions of men," he says; "that was past." Peter divides our life just as history is divided -- into two eras:

Before Christ; and Anno Domini (in the year of our Lord). Something has happened which has changed our entire life. When Christ comes into our life, the past is past; there is a new quality of life which begins at that point. Peter indicates in verse 3 that the people to whom he was writing had a very sordid past. We tend to think of people in the New Testament church as extraordinary mortals, perhaps not subject to the same passions and drives and problems as we. But they were men and women just like us. They had the same problems. And yet, the past is past -- buried in the deepest sea. It can never, never trouble me! It is gone, buried under the Flood. I should not get my scuba gear and try to find it. It is gone, buried, past.

And that is true on a day-to-day basis, as well. Not only did it become true for me when I asked Christ to come into my life, but it is true today, this moment. Perhaps last night or this morning you were guilty of one of the sins mentioned here, and now you are sitting there with a burden of guilt, frustrated by your failure, feeling your weakness. The past is past. The time past was sufficient for living like that; there is a new era which begins now. Accept forgiveness, go back into the Ark, and let the Lord carry you right on through whatever problems you have to face today.

Jeremiah was seated on the mountain overlooking Jerusalem, watching the city burn -- the culmination of the judgments of God against that great city. And as he watched it burn, he wrote these words:

**It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed,
For His compassion never fail.
They are new every morning:
Great is Thy faithfulness.**

The Lord is new to you today. Your life is new today. "If any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come." Verses 4 and 5 go on to indicate what the reaction of the people will be to our living this way:

**And in all this, they are surprised that you do not run with them into the same excess of
dissipation, and they malign you; but they shall give account to Him who is ready to judge
the living and the dead.**

You will surprise people if you live this way if you are loving and bold and forthright, and you have a good conscience. In the midst of a generation of men and women who act contrarily, you will be an astonishment. As a matter of fact, the term Peter uses means that you will be a "stranger" to them. You are not even of their culture. They will not understand, and they will malign you. I have a dear friend who is going through a very difficult time right now in his work. For years he has been faithful in his job, has done what is right, has tried to correct abuses where he saw them, and has lived as Peter says we are to live in the midst of opposition, and yet today he is being maligned. Behind his back people are saying things which are not true. They are undercutting him. At a time like this any of us would be tempted to say, "I don't understand. It doesn't make any sense. I'm doing what's right. Why don't people respond the right way?" Peter says, "Do not be surprised." In fact, in verse 12 he says, "Beloved, do not be surprised ["think it not strange"] at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you." This is the same word he uses in verse 4. "Do not be surprised, do not think it strange, that they treat you this way. It is because they think you are strange! You are different, and so they will malign you.

But, Peter says, do not get defensive. Do not try to set everything right yourself. God is the righteous Judge, and "they shall give account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead." God in his own time and in his own way, set things right. He is presently judging the living by letting them have their way, letting them reap what they sow. But there is coming a time when everyone will stand before him, and there will be a final and irrevocable judgment! The dead will be judged as well. And so we do not need to be defensive. Get in the Ark, Let God deal with those who oppose you.

If we left the passage at this point, it would seem very grim and harsh and condemnatory. But Peter ends with

these words in verse 6:

For the gospel has for this purpose [What purpose? Well, because everyone is going to stand before the Judge some day] been preached even to those who are dead, that though they are judged in the flesh as men, they may live in the spirit according to the will of God.

He is not saying here that the Gospel has ever been, or ever will be, preached to dead people. That is not the point. It was preached to living people who by the time Peter wrote this had passed away, perhaps from natural causes, or who had been slain in the persecutions which broke out around this time. They were judged in the flesh, according to men. Men felt that they had dispensed with them in the flesh, had put them away. They were gone, dead. But they are alive in the spirit, according to God. And Peter says this is why we preach the gospel -- because, though men may die in the flesh, their spirits can live eternally in fellowship with God. If you have a friend whom you lead to Christ, and he dies, you can rejoice because you know that 'though he was judged in the flesh according to men, he is now living in the spirit according to God.

So Peter is making two points. First, we have an Ark. That is our security. But this is not a message merely of smug self-complacency; there is also a mission involved. So, second, we are to tell others about the Ark. Noah was a preacher of righteousness. He preached by means of his own life in faithfully building the ark, which in itself was a very vivid and dramatic witness to the truth. He demonstrated that he believed the flood was coming, because he took time to build the ark. But he also proclaimed it with his words. We too are to believe the gospel, and thus to be in the Ark. But we are also to proclaim it to others, because a judgment is coming. It is here now. The terrible tragedies around us in our nation are the judgments of God upon us. Judgment has begun now.

What will save men from this judgment? The Ark. And what will save us from the final judgment? The Ark. So preach the Ark. That is what will deliver people.

A number of years ago I was walking with a friend across the campus of Foothill College, and we saw a young man sitting under a tree. We struck up a conversation with him, and discovered that he had been in the Marines and had just recently been discharged. He had served in Viet Nam, and had been very close to death a number of times. I asked him some questions about that experience and learned that he was careless of his life. He really was able to cope with death that was not a problem. But as we began to talk, and I started to share the gospel with him, he stopped me: "Wait a minute. It's very interesting that you should talk to me about this. I was sitting here thinking about my spiritual condition, because I cannot cope with life." Here was a man who could cope with death, but he could not cope with life. He was going under; life was too much. And so we told him about the Ark that saves.

So we have a twofold responsibility: first, to believe the truth, to arm ourselves with this thought, to remain in the Ark; and then to proclaim it. Paul said, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, because it is the power of God unto salvation." It is the only thing that can save people.

Father, we are thankful for an Ark that is seaworthy, one to which we can entrust ourselves completely. Deliver us, Father, from our tentative spirit. Teach us to abandon ourselves totally to what you have done for us, and to be believers in the genuine sense of the word, as we rest in the Ark. Make us bold, and forthright, and yet gracious in our proclamation of the truth. We ask these things in Christ's name, Amen.

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