

Friday Communion service

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Preacher: David Meredith

[0 : 00] Can we turn please to the passage we read in 1 Peter chapter 3, reading at verse 18. We're looking this evening at 18 to the end of the passage.

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, who disobeyed long ago, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, while the ark was being built.

A couple of weeks ago, I happened to be sitting in the hairdresser's chair in a hairdressing salon in Inverness. And the whole experience actually turned into being rather an epiphany for me.

For many years, I had noticed that there was a band of grey hair around the bottom of my head, and I really accepted that as parts of the slings and arrows of growing old.

But under the hairdresser's light, I noticed that the grey had crept up, and there was now extremely significant grey hair on the top of my head.

[1 : 31] And I said this to the hairdresser, I said, I think the top of my head is getting grey. And then I said, I think it's just your light. And she said, David, if that's what gets you through the day, then hold on to that.

If you think it's just the light, then that's fine for you. And if that's the sort of thing that gets you through the week, then really everyone needs something to get them through the day.

Now I find, actually, that hairdressers are tremendous popular philosophers. And she was no exception. She's a lady who can talk in almost any subject under the sun.

But she got something right there that is fundamental to human nature. We all need something to get us through the day. We are people who are born for destiny.

We are people in our very spiritual DNA. It's the desire and knowledge that we need things to aim for. We need a world which is bigger than us, and a world which she described as being something to get you through the day and through the week.

[2 : 39] And I wonder for the congregation here this evening, what is it that gets you through the day? Well, of course, that almost is trite in the light of life itself.

Let's move into this passage, and let's connect where our initial story in the hairdresser connects with this particular passage. Well, 1 Peter was written to an extraordinary church.

It wasn't a church like Bon Accord here in Aberdeen. It wasn't a church that was living out its witness in a relatively friendly environment. The church of 1 Peter's day was living out life in an extremely hostile environment.

This was the era of the neurotic persecution. It was the era where many Christian people were being persecuted for their faith. Dominating the culture at this time was the cult of emperor worship. And if you did not bow, literally, to the great Caesar, then off with your head. This was the era when Christians were, on a daily basis, being fed to the lions.

[3 : 46] And the sport for any middle class woman was to see some pure Christian running for their lives in the arena as they were entertained as the blood of good men and good women were being spilt.

And so, certainly, life for the believer in 1 Peter's church was solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and very often short.

But the incredible thing is that into that church that Peter is writing, into a church that is persecuted, into a church that is finding life extremely difficult, and into a people who were incredibly vulnerable. And so, one must ask himself, what is it that got the average church-going person in Peter's day, through the day, through the week, and through the year?

And yet, there's an extraordinary scenario unfolding here in 1 Peter. Stephen Neill is a very well-known writer. And he wrote a book called History of Christian Missions.

[4 : 54] And he said that in the first three centuries of the church, when the church was blowing like wildfire, if you pardon the mixed metaphor, I quote from Stephen Neill, he said this, every Christian knew that sooner or later, he might have to testify to his faith at the cost of his life.

Now, I will guarantee that nobody here today had to testify about their faith at the possible cost of their life. That simply does not happen here in the Northeast.

It hardly happens at all in this northern world of ours. But it kind of puts our evangelistic methodology under examination. Because if you think that the average evangelistic methodology that we take on board is, if you come to Christ, that there are benefits for you.

We live in a world of a purpose-driven life. We live in a world of a purpose-driven church. Well, 40 days doing this, and there will be phenomenal benefits for you. And it's very much a man-centered philosophy, very often.

If you become a Christian, there will be many things happen to you. And you'll hear a preacher saying, as your marriage goes through difficulties, come to Christ and it will be solved.

[6 : 13] Are you having health problems? Well, that is no problem at all. Because if you come to Christ, he grants healing, which is complete. He will grant healing, which is inner. And he will also grant healing, which is outer.

Or, if you listen to the Joyce Myers of this world, speaking from the comfort of the TV studios into the TV screens of our nations, from between her padded shoulders, she would say, why do you want to drive a Mini when you can drive a Rolls Royce?

I have a diamond ring. You too can have a diamond ring. And so that sort of thing, which to a certain extent we perhaps even buy into, is a million miles away from this authentic New Testament Christianity, which meant that these people were believers in Christ at the very cost of their life.

How challenging it was for the New Testament believers. If you saw Christ, people would say, it may lead to your death. And indeed the question, what gets you through the day, may end well.

Actually, you might not even see the end of the day. And so again, we're moving inward. We're beginning to focus here on our verse, verse 18 onwards.

[7 : 32] One more thing by way of introduction. New Testament theologians are people who are always coming up with new theories. Some of them are extremely interesting.

Some of them have tremendous value. Some of them have very little value. There is a theory that 1 Peter was a sermon before it was a letter.

And the theory was that there was a sermon preached before a baptism. There is another theory that 1 Peter was a sort of New Testament membership manual.

You know, before you signed up in membership in the church, you were given a document which said, this is what the church is all about. This is what you can expect. Now, I think there's some degree of evidence to suggest that there is some truth in that.

That it was a document that was given to believers, certainly, before they were baptized. Because baptism is everywhere in 1 Peter. But what we have here is an extremely interesting thing.

[8 : 37] And I'm coming now to the core of what we're seeing this evening. These are the people who are going through torture. These are the people who may even give their life for their faith.

What advice would you give to people in that situation? Now, the extraordinary thing here is, at least I think it's extraordinary, is that the advice given to the people in Peter's church was not really all that practical.

It wasn't, in a sense, a list of five things you must do in the face of persecution. And it's interesting as well that many of us are getting Christ of our preaching more and more practical.

And that is not a bad thing. I am not arguing against that. Perhaps one of the weaknesses of our Reformed Pilgrim has been a lack of practical teaching. And again, that is a given.

I'm not arguing with that. But there is another argument. That very often what gets us through the day and what gets us through the life is not perhaps overt practical teaching as such.

[9 : 54] But there is something that focuses us right back in the very core of our faith. It is a teaching which shows us in the midst of trials and tribulations and difficulties what is really important in life and what is really significant.

And so that's what we have this evening. We say, well, why are we believers? If we're going to profess faith, why do we go on in the Christian life? We ask basic questions.

Who is Jesus Christ? Why did Jesus Christ come? What was his death all about? Was the death of Jesus simply another example of heroic suffering in the face of injustice?

Is Jesus Christ up there in the pantheon of social reformers like Martin Luther King? Is he someone whose death was not all that different to the death of the great men and women of our day?

Or was there something significant? Was there something different and extraordinary? Was there something amazing in the death of Jesus Christ and in the life of Jesus that really transforms our way of life and makes our worldview radically different to the worldview of anyone else?

[11:22] And so, we've got to ask ourselves tonight, what is it that Peter said got the people through the day in 1 Peter's day? What did it tell us about the Lord Jesus Christ?

Well, if we look at the passage this evening from verse 18, I suggest that there are four things here about Jesus. four things which really got these people through their lives.

Look for, if you will please, at verse 18 for the first one. The first thing about Jesus Christ is very simple. Christ dealt with sin.

It's the first thing. And it is so simple. Christ dealt with sin. What does the text say? For Christ died for sins once for all.

The righteous for the unrighteous to bring you to God. Now, you know, St. David, we didn't get out in a relatively nice, but, you know, Friday night in Aberdeen to hear the obvious that Christ dealt with sin.

[12:31] Verse 18, for Christ died for sins once for all. Now, for most people, that is no big deal. Out there in a wider culture, it is made with great indifference the fact that Christ dealt with sin.

Now, there are two reasons, there are two perspectives on this. The first one is that most people don't believe that sin is a big issue. There are absolutely, at least there are hardly any people who don't believe in sin at all.

Well, we've seen it in the newspapers over the last few weeks. We've seen horrendous things that are about this week in the news, the honour murder. Remember, someone's father instructed the brothers to kill the daughter's fiancée.

There was a situation of a child in Edinburgh who was left in the flat and the husband or the father wanted to sell the story to a tabloid for £30,000.

We cannot deny that there is sin. And nobody in the culture will deny that sin is out there. And we know that perhaps we have personally sinned.

[13:46] Someone would say, well, we've not told the truth as much as we ought to. We've not been as generous as we could have been. So, most people will admit that there is some sort of sin, but at the grade of things, everyone would say that they were at least at the bottom end.

Even those of us in the church, although we may come out with this stuff about being sinners, although we may be ingrained with free church teachings since we were incredibly young, but in our inner consciousness we really feel that it is no big issue that we have sinned.

So, some people believe that sin is a big issue. Other folk have forgotten that sin is a big issue.

Their conscience tells them each day that the Bible is right.

Many people who come along to church here in Bonacorda, perhaps they more accurately do not come along to church in Bonacorda. In their conscience, they know that they have heard, perhaps when they were younger, that there is a big issue in their life that they have to deal with called sin. But why are they not walking here on a Sunday? Why are they not walking here to hear the word of God? Because they have suppressed that. They have suppressed it. And so, what they do is they know deep deep that there is an issue, but they're not dealing with it.

[15:10] One day perhaps they will, but they know that today is not perhaps a day. But what if, and this is where the main application is, what if the matter of our relationship to God was quite simply the greatest human need that there ever was?

what if this evening many of you even come to this church tonight burdened and worried about many things? You may have many concerns about your health, you may have many concerns about your family, you may have concerns about your parents, you may have concerns about what's happening round about.

And I am not making light of all these things, but what if tiring over them all, surpassing every other issue, was the question, how can a sinful man be right with a holy God, if there is no other issue as important as that, then surely the fact here that Christ has dealt with that sin is a matter of superb importance, and surely the fact that Christ has dealt with our sin is something which will indeed get

us through the week, and will get us through our lives, rejoicing, that we can say, it is well with my soul.

The people in Peter's day got this, you know. Isaiah 59 2 said, our iniquities have separated us from God. The greatest thing in the world is that Jesus Christ has died for our sins, and so as we sit down at the Lord's supper on Sunday morning, we can look and say, what is my faith all about? What gets me through my life? Christ died for my sins. How did he die? What the passage tells us. [17:09] It tells us two things about his death. First of all, it tells us that his death was penal. His death was the penalty for our sin.

The righteous for the unrighteous, doesn't it say that? In verse 18, the righteous for the unrighteous, the great exchange, the perfect son of God giving his life for the imperfect man or woman. My eight-year-old son is tremendous at swapping things. And sometimes the deal doesn't go all that well.

He will do something crazy like swap a PS2 game for a dauber. Now, you may not know what a dauber is. A dauber for the uninitiated is a marble, a certain type of marble for which an eight-year-old may die for.

It is a thing to get. And you can buy a dauber for about ten pence, I think. But he, in his pursuit of the perfect dauber, the perfect marble, will very often do a ridiculous swap.

[18:25] He will swap something very, very expensive and very, very valuable for something which is really intrinsically worthless. We all know about swapping. And what do we see here in verse 18?

We see the great exchange which is absolutely ridiculous in human eyes. The righteous for the unrighteous. Me, a sinner, exchanged for the Son of God.

Me, and you, someone who deserved nothing but God's wrath and God's curse, and yet that is all made topsy-turvy as Christ is placed on the cross of Calvary in our place.

And so his death was penal. The just wrath of God was poured out on him. Jesus Christ paid the penalty of our sin. Jesus Christ paid the whole thing.

Now in the Bible, Satan is called the accuser. Satan is, if you like, a prosecutor. Because I'm a relatively sad individual, one of the things I love to do is I love to go to court and listen to advocates and solicitors.

[19:41] I really enjoy it. It's the best and cheapest theatre that you can get in Scotland. And very often you will see these men and a prosecutor with forensic diligence will go right into the very core of the issue.

Now Satan is a brilliant prosecutor. The Bible says he has the power of death. In one sense he does. He knows the law better than anyone else.

And if anyone will make the charges stick, it will be Satan. Have you experienced him in your own life at times? Have you experienced the accuser saying how dare you call yourself a Christian? How dare you even think of church membership? How dare you even profess to be a believer? And he begins this incredibly powerful forensic analysis of our spiritual condition.

And he points out our hypocrisy. He points out our indwelling sin. He points out our darling sins. He says you hold all these things to yourself and you still call yourself a believer.

[20:48] And he knows how he can make the charges stick. But how can the greatest prosecutor in the universe make the charges stick if the penalty has been paid?

It's impossible. It is absolutely impossible. Because when Satan himself comes as the accuser, the answer is Christ died for sins.

The righteous for the unrighteous. The penalty has been paid. I am free. There is no condemnation for those who are under Christ Jesus. There is therefore no death for those who are believing in Christ.

A lot of people talk about contemporary worship songs as being appalling. Many of them are trite. Many of them are superficial. But some of them are gems.

And one of my favourite ones is before the throne of God above. Let me remind you of one of the verses there. It's incredibly relevant for verse 18.

[21:55] When Satan tempts me to despair and tells me of the guilt within. Do you recognise that? Upwards I look and see him there who made an end of all my sin.

Because my sinless saviour died, my sinful soul is counted free. For God the just is satisfied to look on him and pardon me.

You come to the Lord's supper on Sunday morning with a smile on your face and with a joy in your heart. For God the just is satisfied to look on him his son and pardon me.

And so that's what we're saying. His death was first of called penal. The righteous for the unrighteous. But his death was secondly final. Look again what it says from the passage.

For Christ died for sins once for all. There was a finality about it. That was the end of the road.

[23 : 05] When you're given the announcements on a Sunday morning here in Bonacord, you will never have the announcement well those of you who have got bulls for slaughter please take them after the service at the bottom of the stairs there and the Kirk session will slaughter them on your behalf.

We don't slaughter bulls anymore. We don't do that. It's all at an end. There is no more blood because Jesus has died.

It is finished. That's one of the major differences with Roman Catholic theology and their own theology. One perhaps can appreciate many elements of how people are attracted to Romanism. You can't appreciate how people are attracted to the celebration, the color, the vibrancy, the theater. There is attraction in that.

Of course there is. But what is unattractive in a spectacular fashion is that when Christ is killed in the mass week after week after week after week after week there is no end to it.

[24 : 21] Whereas it says here it is finished. Christ died for sins once for all. And so you begin to see there is a believer sitting in their sitting room in Peter's church and he's saying how can I get on in life how can I really cope with all these things and Peter says well first of all Christ dealt with sin but there's more secondly we notice here that Christ conquered death look again look again at verse 18 the second half he he was put to death in the body but made alive by the spirit death was in the air the aroma of the blood was hovering around the arena these people lived with death every single day and if we're honest it's also on the agenda of our own culture these days the popularity of death even in youth culture never ceases to surprise me when I see a 15 year old girl dressed in almost exactly the way that my dear godly free presbyterian granny was dressed in

I think what is happening here you see people walking along dressed in black absorbed in the goth culture singing about death all the time the popularity of Kurt Cobain remains he died in 1994 almost before most of these folk were born and yet there is this obsession with death almost like lemmings drawn towards the light of death if you again pardon the contradiction in that but even older people death is the one thing they will not talk about my favourite poet without a doubt is Dylan Thomas who's introduced to Dylan Thomas as a thirteen year old and have enjoyed reading his stuff ever since and I think my favourite of the favourites is that one that he he says do not go gentle into that good night old age should burn and rave at close of day rage rage against the dying of the light and it's taking on a new poignancy for me as

I am with many people going through the ravages of death many older people who are looking at that last great enemy and they are raging against the dying of the light and so whether it's a Kurt Cobain obsessed goth or someone who is into Dylan Thomas who is middle aged and middle class and who is revolted at the whole idea of death this passage says Christ has dealt with sin but Christ has secondly conquered death look at what it says about death there he was put to death in the body but made alive by the spirit the language there is deliberate he was put to death in the body in other words that brings out the torturous nature of his death the language deliberately parallels what many of the people there are experiencing they were being put to death it's brought out in a creed he suffered and was buried put to death brings out the violent nature of his death but for three days he was dead and by the power of the spirit he see you see this deliberately contrasting phrase don't you put to death in the body but made alive in the spirit you cannot keep a good man down here we have the fact that

Jesus Christ could not remain dead because of who he was now that really does turn our lives around Christ has conquered death few people here have not experienced death in some form few people perhaps even in recent weeks and months and years have not experienced the agony of seeing their loved one being swallowed by these ugly jaws of death what keeps someone going in that situation I think comfort is too soft a word here when we stand in a windswept highland hillside at a cemetery there when the wind and the rain are blowing down when we see the open grave there and our loved one being lowered down we think this is not the end because connected with that is that

Christ was put to death in the body but made alive in the spirit and because he lives I can face tomorrow because he lives the power of the grave has been smashed because he has taken the sting out of death because he has robbed the grave of its victory that means that that scenario is not the end of the line and the grave can in a sense rightly be mocked what kept them going Christ dealt with sin Christ conquered death there's a third thing that kept them going Christ reigns over hell look at verse 19 through him also he went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago when God waited patient in the days of Noah where the ark was being built I understand you have a professor of

[30 : 37] New Testament coming for your communion if you're ever in a conversation with him ask him for 1 Peter chapter 3 verse 19 means Martin Luther said this this is a wonderful text and a more obscure passage than any other in the New Testament so I do not know for certainty what Peter means I bought one small commentary recently in 1 Peter and 38 pages are devoted to these two verses it is a complex verse I think personally it refers to that point when Noah preached to the unbelieving people when the ark was being built these people are now dead and they are now in prison they have rejected the gospel they are now in hell so when Noah preached to these people in the time of Noah he preached in the name of Christ to them but without getting into all the detail here let me offer one suggestive line here very very briefly that it seems to me that whatever this passage means and it may mean a variety of things that one of the things that it certainly says is that there is a declaration even to the very powers of hell themselves that

Jesus Christ is victor there is a declaration to hell that Jesus Christ has conquered there is a declaration to hell whenever that was made is not clear and is not frankly all that important but what we have here is he announces to hell and to the devil it's over for you there can be an unhealthy fear of the devil a sense that he's still in with a chance and I meet with people constantly and they go around looking incredibly miserable they say these are dark days the devil is rampant in these days and they speak almost as if the devil has a victory he's dead and Christ says to him you're dead you're finished it's the end for you you're chained Calvary smashed your power boy that's what this passage is saying we must realize that in Christ he has been defeated now Martin Luther may not have understood this passage exegetically he may have had problems understanding what it meant but I believe he thoroughly understood it pastorally Martin Luther wrote this tremendous hymn and though this world with devils filled should threaten to undo us we will not fear for God has willed his truth to triumph through us this prince of darkness grim we tremble not for him his rage we can endure for lo his doom is sure what he of his son in ofzenie de tr by de and to in de par rap sampai to is