

Commands for Living

1 Peter 3:1-22 — Understanding I and II Peter Series, Part 5

By Escape the Mustard Tree

Introduction

Peter ended chapter two with Jesus as the pattern for suffering wrongly: "when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously" (1 Pet. 2:23). The next word Peter writes is "likewise." He uses it to open his word to wives (3:1) and again to open his word to husbands (3:7). What he's about to say about marriage, he's saying in the light of the steps Jesus left.

Read these commands on their own and they can sound like a list of house rules. Peter never gives them on their own. The husband and wife are "heirs together" (3:7). All of them together are "called to this, that you may inherit a blessing" (3:9). The same inheritance that opened the letter is still the reason for everything in it.

I. Wives, Without a Word

"Wives, likewise, be submissive to your own husbands, that even if some do not obey the word, they, without a word, may be won by the conduct of their wives, when they observe your chaste conduct accompanied by fear." (1 Pet. 3:1-2)

"Likewise" points back to Jesus, who suffered without answering back and left the outcome with His Father. A wife is told to be submissive in that same way, even where it costs her.

Look at the husband Peter has in mind: one who does "not obey the word." That tells us who he is. Scripture never tells the unsaved to obey God's word; it calls them to believe. When the jailer asked what he must do to be saved, the answer was "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31). Until then, "the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God... nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14). Obedience is asked of those who've believed and been made alive (Eph. 2:5), who can now receive what the word says. So this husband is a saved man who isn't living by the word, the same disobedience Peter named in those who stumbled over the Cornerstone (1 Pet. 2:8).

His wife isn't told to argue him into obedience. He may be won "without a word," by watching how she lives.

"Do not let your adornment be merely outward—arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel—rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God." (1 Pet. 3:3-4)

There's that word again: *incorruptible*. Peter has already used it for the inheritance (1:4) and for the seed of the new birth (1:23). Now he uses it for the beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit. Gold, which he's already told them "perishes" (1:7), wears out. This doesn't, and God calls it "very precious."

"For in this manner, in former times, the holy women who trusted in God also adorned themselves, being submissive to their own husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, whose daughters you are if you do good and are not afraid with any terror." (1 Pet. 3:5-6)

The holy women "trusted [hoped] in God." Peter's verb is the verb for hope. Sarah's confidence rested on God and on what He'd promised, for "she judged Him faithful who had promised" (Heb. 11:11), and that's the same hope Peter's readers had been given: God "raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God" (1 Pet. 1:21). A woman whose hope is set there can "do good" and not be "afraid with any terror."

II. Husbands, Likewise

"Husbands, likewise, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered." (1 Pet. 3:7)

"Likewise" again. The husband is held to the same pattern, and the word Peter uses for his wife is *heirs together*. She's his fellow heir. What the husband stands to inherit, she stands to inherit alongside him, and Peter calls it "the grace of life." Grace is the word he'd already used for what's still "to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 1:13).

The stakes are concrete: a husband who doesn't live with his wife "with understanding" and give her honor will find his prayers hindered.

Paul wrote to the same region about the same household relationships, and he gave the same reason. To the Colossians, in the province of Asia, he wrote: "And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ. But he who does wrong will be repaid for what he has done, and there is no partiality" (Col. 3:23-25). The inheritance is called a *reward*. And "no partiality" is the same thing Peter said of the Father "who without partiality judges according to each one's work" (1 Pet. 1:17).

To the Ephesians, Paul went further. Marriage itself is a picture: "This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:32). What a husband and wife are doing in their home points past their home.

III. All of You: Inherit a Blessing

"Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous; not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing." (1 Pet. 3:8-9)

Now Peter widens it to everyone. Notice the reason he gives for not paying back evil with evil: "that you may inherit a blessing." It's the inheritance again, and the word *inherit* tells us a blessing can be gained, or missed. Hebrews uses the same phrase about the man who missed it: Esau, "who for one morsel of food sold his birthright. For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears" (Heb. 12:16-17).

Then Peter quotes a psalm:

"He who would love life and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips from speaking deceit. Let him turn away from evil and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their prayers; but the face of the LORD is against those who do evil." (1 Pet. 3:10-12; Ps. 34:12-16)

This is Psalm 34, the same psalm Peter echoed in chapter two: "Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good" (Ps. 34:8; 1 Pet. 2:3). Its heading tells us when David wrote it: "when he pretended madness before Abimelech, who drove him away" (Ps. 34, title). Abimelech was the king 1 Samuel calls Achish of Gath, and David had fled to him to get away from Saul (1 Sam. 21:10). He'd already been anointed king, but he was hunted, with no throne yet, and soon after he was hiding in the cave of Adullam with the men who gathered to him there (1 Sam. 22:1-2). It's a psalm written by an heir who didn't have his inheritance yet, and Peter hands it to people in the same position.

IV. A Reason for the Hope

"And who is he who will harm you if you become followers of what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you are blessed. 'And do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled.' But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear; having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed. For it is better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil." (1 Pet. 3:13-17)

"Do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled" is Isaiah: "Nor be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled. The LORD of hosts, Him you shall hallow; let Him be your fear" (Isa. 8:12-13). The very next verse in Isaiah says He will be "a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense" (Isa. 8:14), the line Peter used in chapter two for those who stumble over the Cornerstone (1 Pet. 2:8). Peter keeps going back to the same passage. Those who set the Lord apart in their hearts have nothing to fear from men. Those who don't will stumble over Him.

Then the command: "always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you." What hope? Peter has been naming it since the first chapter. They were begotten "to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1:3). They were told to "rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1:13). Their "faith and hope are in God," because God raised Jesus and "gave Him glory" (1:21). Put those together and the hope has a shape: what God did for Jesus, raising Him and giving Him glory, is what they hope He'll do for them, and it comes at Jesus' revelation.

Hebrews calls it "an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast" (Heb. 6:19), and ties it to inheritance too: "show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end, that you do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises" (Heb. 6:11-12).

If someone asked you today what your hope is, could you answer? Peter expected every one of his readers to be able to, and to do it "with meekness and fear."

V. Christ Suffered, and Eight Souls Were Saved

"For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water." (1 Pet. 3:18-20)

Most people find this the hardest passage in the letter. Start with what's clear. "Christ also suffered." Peter is still on the same thread: suffer for doing good, as He did, and leave the outcome with God.

Then the spirits in prison. Peter identifies them by when they sinned: "who formerly were disobedient... in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared." In his second letter he names angels who sinned and were "delivered into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment," and he places them right before "the flood on the world of the ungodly" (2 Pet. 2:4-5). Jude says those angels "did not keep their proper domain" and are "reserved in everlasting chains under darkness" (Jude 6). Put the three together, and set them beside Genesis 6:2, 4, where "the sons of God" came in to "the daughters of men" just before the flood, and the inference is that these are the same beings. They're a different group from Satan and his angels, who aren't in chains; they're still active "in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12). What Jesus proclaimed to the imprisoned spirits, Peter doesn't tell us, and we shouldn't fill it in.

Now look at Noah. Peter says "eight *souls*" were saved through water. There's that word again, the one this letter keeps returning to (1:9, 22; 2:11, 25). And notice who Noah was before the flood ever came: "Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD... Noah was a just man, perfect in his generations. Noah walked with God" (Gen. 6:8-9). Peter calls him "a preacher of righteousness" (2 Pet. 2:5). The flood didn't make Noah righteous; he already was. What the water did was carry him and his household through God's judgment on that world and set them down in the next one.

"There is also an antitype which now saves us—baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him." (1 Pet. 3:21-22)

Peter guards the point himself. The water doesn't save by washing anyone; it's "not the removal of the filth of the flesh." What saves is "the answer of a good conscience toward God," the same good conscience he just told them to keep while they're slandered (3:16), and it rests on "the resurrection of Jesus Christ." Baptism pictures what the flood pictured: passing through judgment and death and coming up on the other side (Rom. 6:3-4).

And where is Jesus now? "Gone into heaven and... at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him." The authority is His. He hasn't yet taken His own throne, though; He sits with His Father on His Father's throne (Rev. 3:21), "from that time waiting till His enemies are made His footstool" (Heb. 10:12-13). Suffering came first for Him, and glory follows, just as Peter wrote: "the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow" (1 Pet. 1:11).

Applying "Commands for Living"

Every command in this chapter meets someone in a hard place: a wife with a husband who doesn't obey the word, a husband tempted to treat his wife as less than a fellow heir, people being reviled for doing good. Peter's answer every time is the same pattern Jesus left. Don't pay back evil for evil, keep a good conscience, set the Lord apart in your heart, and leave the outcome with God.

And every time, the reason is ahead. Husband and wife are heirs together. All of them are called to inherit a blessing, the kind Esau found he could lose. Their hope is anchored in what God did for Jesus and will do for them at His revelation. A Christian who has hold of that hope will have something to say when he's asked for a reason.

Looking Ahead

Next, Peter carries the thread into chapter four: "Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind" (1 Pet. 4:1).

Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.