

REMEMBER KEY SPIRITUAL FACTS**1 PETER 3:18-22**

How many of you enjoy a good road trip to some vacation destination? As long as I don't have several road trips right in a row or it's terribly long, I enjoy getting in the car and rolling along through the countryside. There are a few things that can really wreck a road trip, however. Here's my top three: road construction, bad weather and crying, bored kids. Those three factors can suck all the joy and adventure out of any road trip quicker than anything else. You might compare the journey of life to a really long road trip. And just like a literal road trip, bad weather – storms like setbacks, disappointments, failures, or tragedies – along life's journey can rob us of joy and contentment. It might be something physical like a chronic illness. It might be something relational like a troubled marriage. It might be something emotional like a battle with depression. It might be something financial like losing a job. It might be something spiritual like just losing a sense of God's presence for some reason.

Peter, a key Christian leader in the first century, wrote a letter to a group of new Christians living in what is now the country of Turkey. They were facing some very real storms in their lives. These were storms of opposition and even persecution caused by neighbors and co-workers who had become suspicious and hostile towards them because of their faith in Jesus. Peter wanted these first followers of Jesus to stand strong in the midst of those storms. Throughout his letter, Peter shares principles about facing storms in life that can apply to our storms in life even though they might be very different than the ones faced by those Christians centuries ago. Today, let's consider chapter three and verses 18-22.

Your first reaction to what I just read might be, "What on earth was that about?" Welcome this morning to a passage many Bible scholars consider to be the most difficult passage in the entire Bible to interpret or understand! It probably all made good sense to Peter, but it's difficult for us now to follow his train of thought. But don't lose the forest for the trees here! Peter's overall point is that he wants them and us to remember and hold on to some key spiritual facts as we journey through life and deal with those inevitable storms along the way. It's helpful to me to organize Peter's statements here under two big, main ideas. So, here's the first one.

ALWAYS REMEMBER WHAT JESUS HAS DONE FOR YOU.

These followers of Jesus were suffering. They were having a hard time of it. Peter reminds them and us that Jesus Himself was well acquainted with hard times. If anyone suffered unjustly it was Jesus. If anyone suffered for doing what was good and right it was Jesus. But more importantly, Jesus has gone before us and done some truly wonderful, astounding things that make our journey through life and its storms not only bearable and possible but also triumphant. Peter mentions four key spiritual facts here.

The first one is the necessity of Jesus' death. Always remember what God has done to reclaim an eternal relationship with you. It's stated clearly in v. 18, "Christ suffered for our sins once for all time. He never sinned, but he died for sinners to bring you safely

home to God....” (1 Pt 3:18 NLT) To put it bluntly, God the Father sent God the Son to die in your place. Why did Jesus need to die? Because you’re a sinner and God had already determined that the just penalty for any and all sin is death and eternal separation from Him. This is God’s universe and He will not tolerate the presence of sin or evil forever. Sin could not be overlooked. A penalty had to be paid. God, out of His mercy and grace, decided to pay it Himself in the person of Jesus. Don’t ever think that Jesus’ death on the cross was some kind of terrible accident as if Jesus was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Don’t ever think Jesus’ death was just a tragic mistake either as if Jesus was simply a good man being put to death by bad people for some noble cause. Jesus’ death was the plan and purpose of God before this world was even created. So, remember this fact the next time you get discouraged by the storms in your life. If God had not done what He did and if Jesus had not died the death that He died, you would never get to Heaven and all the storms in your journey through life would accomplish precisely nothing.

Some years ago now, an airliner crashed just after taking off from the Detroit airport killing 155 people. There was only one survivor – a four year old named Cecelia from Tempe, Arizona. When rescuers found Cecelia in the plane’s wreckage, they found it hard to believe she’d even been on the plane. They wondered instead if she was a passenger in one of the cars on the highway onto which the plane had crashed. But when the passenger register for the flight was checked, - sure enough - there was Cecelia’s name. How had she survived? As the plane was literally falling out of the sky, Cecelia’s mother, unbuckled her own seat belt, got down on her knees in front of her daughter, wrapped her arms and body around Cecelia, and would not let her go. Nothing could separate that child from her mother’s love – not the terrible disaster of a plane crash and not the flames and chaos that followed. God loves you more than Cecelia’s mother loved her daughter. That’s why He left Heaven in the person of Jesus and covered us with the sacrifice of his own body in order to save us.

Now, the second thing Jesus did for us is the one that sounds kind of weird. It has to do with all of this stuff about Jesus preaching to spirits in prison there in v. 19-20. But, don’t lose the forest for the trees! Peter’s main point is the universality of Jesus’ triumph. I won’t resolve all the interpretative issues surrounding these verses today, but let me share a few conclusions with you. In v. 18, Peter says that while the body of Jesus was dead, His spirit was quickened or raised to life. That word “spirit” is capitalized in many English translations which would lead us to believe that Peter is talking about the Holy Spirit. But in the original Greek “spirit” is not capitalized, so Peter could just as easily be referring to Jesus’ own spirit or soul – the unseen part of every human being that is the essence of our personhood. Before His resurrection, then, the body of Jesus was dead but His own spirit was brought back to life before His physical body. During that time, Jesus apparently visited a place that Peter refers to here as a “prison.” What is that?

The Bible teaches that people who put their trust in Jesus for salvation are taken to Heaven at the moment of death. They’re in the Lord’s presence immediately. But what happens to non-Christians when they die? There’s some good biblical arguments that say they don’t go to Hell immediately. Instead, it’s suggested that they’re kept in a kind

of intermediate place sometimes referred to as Hades in the Bible. This temporary place – or Hades – is where the spirits or souls of unsaved people reside until the time when they, also, will be resurrected. Remember that the Bible teaches that God’s final judgment follows Jesus’ Second Coming. It’s then that unsaved people – people who refused Jesus in this life- will be sent to Hell permanently.

Peter seems to suggest that during the time when Jesus’ body lay in the tomb – after His physical death but before His physical resurrection – His spirit or soul visited this intermediate place. The Bible doesn’t say Jesus ever visited Hell, but this verse suggests He has visited Hades. Now there in Hades, He preached to certain spirits. Were these the souls of dead human beings? I don’t think so, because in my study of this passage I learned that the New Testament refers to human beings as “souls” but not as “spirits.” Now, fallen angels or demons are often referred to as “spirits,” however. So, that leads me to conclude that Jesus preached to spirit beings in Hades – fallen angels or demonic beings – rather than to dead, unsaved human beings. Peter says these spirit beings were active during the time of Noah – way back in Old Testament times – but he doesn’t elaborate any further beyond that. What does it mean by saying Jesus “preached” here? It almost sounds like He’s offering salvation to these demonic creatures, doesn’t it? But the Greek word used here doesn’t refer to preaching about salvation, but instead to announce or proclaim something. So, what did Jesus announce? He proclaimed, He declared, He announced His victory over Satan and all demonic forces. That ties in really well with v. 22 where Peter says, “Now Christ has gone to heaven. He is seated in the place of honor next to God, and all the angels and authorities and powers accept his authority.” (1 Pt 3:22 NLT)

So, what’s Peter’s point? Jesus’ triumph was universal in scope – it even included Satan and his demonic army. I’m sure many of the Christians to whom Peter wrote this letter felt like Satan was winning. All the evidence pointed to that conclusion. Come to think of it, aren’t there times when you just feel like the devil is winning? It looks like he’s winning in your family. It seems like he’s winning when it comes to your finances. He certainly looks like he has the upper hand in our country and in our culture right now. But we’re reminded here that Satan is a defeated enemy. Yes, he can most certainly rear his ugly head and do lots of damage, to be sure. But the devil can never win any battle of real, eternal consequence, because at the cross, Jesus dealt him a mortal wound from which he can never recover. Jesus even entered Hades and told some of the devil’s troops that despite what looked like His defeat at the cross, Jesus was, and is, and will be the Victor, the Champion, the all-time and forever Winner of the greatest war that’s ever been fought. And He invites you and me to share in that triumph. Remember that the next time you get discouraged by all those storms raging in and around your life! Jesus is Lord of Heaven, Lord of the Earth and Lord even in those realms that seem to be under the devil’s domination today.

Picture this scene with me. It’s a warm October Saturday back in 1982. Badger Stadium in Madison, Wisconsin is packed with more than 60,000 die hard University of Wisconsin fans. They’re watching their Badgers play football against the Michigan State Spartans. It soon becomes obvious that Michigan State has the better team that

year. Something odd happens, though. As the score gets more and more lopsided against Wisconsin, bursts of applause and shouts of joy come from the Wisconsin fans. Why would they cheer when their team was losing? Because 70 miles away the Milwaukee Brewers were beating the St. Louis Cardinals in game three of the 1982 World Series. These were the days before smart phones and enormous high definition screens in stadiums that provide encyclopedic information. But many in the fans in the stadium that day were listening to portable radios and they were responding to something other than their immediate circumstances. Right there and then the Badgers were getting shellacked. But elsewhere the Brewers were beating the Cardinals! The Bible tells us to fix our eyes not on what is seen, but what is unseen. Yes, Satan is going to win a battle here and there, but he's already lost the war.

Peter mentions a third fact about Jesus you should always remember – the power of His resurrection mentioned there in v. 21. It's almost impossible to over-estimate the importance of serving a risen, fully alive Lord Jesus Christ today. The resurrection proves Jesus is God. The resurrection proves that the offer of salvation is real and has been fully accepted by God the Father. The resurrection proves that death has been conquered. The resurrection also proves the truth of Jesus' message because a dead Savior can't save anyone. Because Jesus rose from the dead, you can live life every day with great hope and expectation. You need to remember that and hold on it the next time you feel discouraged by those storms blowing into your life.

Don't overlook a fourth important fact about Jesus mentioned here: the victorious impact of His ascension. "Now Christ has gone to heaven. He is seated in the place of honor next to God, and all the angels and authorities and powers accept his authority." (1 Pt 3:22 NLT) Some forty days after He rose from the dead, Jesus went back to Heaven. He now occupies a place of unparalleled power and authority throughout the universe. From God's throne, He intercedes for you and me. He's also preparing a place for us and one day He will come to get all of His followers and take us home to Heaven forever. Remember that the next time you get overwhelmed by the storms along life's journey! Jesus is still on the throne. No one's going to unseat Him. He has won and he will win. And because you belong to Him, you will be victorious, too. Peter's message to those struggling followers of Jesus is one that works for you and me. As you journey through life with all of its storms, be encouraged, get strengthened, and be blessed by always remembering what Jesus has done for you. In addition,

ALWAYS REMEMBER WHAT'S BEING ASKED OF YOU.

I see four things you and I are called to do and to be as we journey through this life. First of all, you're called to have courage in the face of people's opposition. Peter wanted to drive that point home. Throughout this letter, he says, in effect, "You've got to expect opposition from ungodly people. It's part of your calling as a child of God. It's part of the territory. It's always been like that." Maybe that's why Peter brings up Noah in the verses we read. He illustrated this very truth. Noah was called by God to build an ark. The godless people around Noah ridiculed and opposed him. But he stood his ground, put his trust in God, and obeyed God regardless. That's what we're called to do

as well. There are going to be people who attack you because you follow Jesus. Or they might attack you for standing against what's immoral or evil which is simply an outgrowth of following Jesus. So what should you do? Accept it. Receive it. Act courageously in the midst of it. Realize it's a part of your calling. It's what you signed up for when you started to follow Jesus. Noah faced it. Jesus faced it. You will be called to go through it, too, in some way in your journey through life. So stand strong!

Second, you're called to have faith in the face of apparent failure. Don't you think those new Christians to whom Peter wrote this letter wrestled with feelings of failure? Here they were trying to win people to Jesus, but instead they were running into all kinds of hostility, suspicion and opposition. The only people Noah was able to convince to get on the ark with him were his wife, three sons and their wives. Everyone else drowned! But Noah is rightly honored as a man of great faith because He simply kept doing the will of God even when he seemed to be a failure. Even Jesus' death on the cross looked like a failure at first. At the time, nobody understood it as the greatest victory ever won. What's the lesson? Don't lose heart when you're faithful to the Lord in your daily life, when you're faithful to Him by pointing your family in Jesus' direction, when you remain faithful to the Lord in all of life's ups and down. God vindicated Noah. God vindicated His son, Jesus. You can trust Him to vindicate you, too. So stand strong!

Third, you're called to keep your commitment in the face of life's adversities. Peter mentions baptism here which might seem a bit out of place to us. But baptism was back then – and it still should be today – the sign and symbol of one's complete commitment to Jesus as Lord and Savior. When a person got baptized in the first century, it wasn't just because your parents thought it was a nice thing to do or because it was a way to join the church. It was, as Peter says in v. 21, "...a response to God from a clean conscience...." (1 Pt. 3:21 NLT) In Peter's day, when a new follower of Jesus was preparing to be baptized, he or she was asked if he or she would obey God, serve God and break with his or her sinful past. It was a promise to obey Jesus come what may in life. It was a pledge to follow Jesus regardless of life's many ups and downs. It was a personal and conscious decision to stand strong!

Fourth and finally, as you journey through life and all of its storms, you're called to keep your resolve to share Jesus in the face of people's spiritual lostness. Did you know that some people use the passage we've been reflecting on today to suggest that spiritually lost people will be given a second chance to become followers of Jesus after they've died? They interpret Peter's comments here about Jesus preaching to these spirits in prison as Jesus offering salvation to people who refused Jesus in this life and giving them a second chance in this intermediate place called Hades. I think that's a serious misunderstanding of this passage as well as a denial of an essential biblical truth. Spiritual judgment by God follows physical death. The Bible says, "And just as each person is destined to die once and after that comes judgment." (Heb 9:27 NLT) There are no second chances. All the more reason that you and I need to develop a heart for lost people. If they die without Jesus, they face an eternity in Hell. Who are you praying for? Who are you seeking to have a spiritual conversation with? Who's ready

to hear you present the Gospel to them? Who needs you to give a reason for the hope that you have within you? In this matter of sharing your faith, stand strong!

Is addressing people's spiritual lostness challenging? You bet it is! Imagine walking through the Polaris Mall or Easton this afternoon and seeing someone peddling bright orange life jackets. He's trying his best to gather a crowd. He's explaining the value of life jackets and how to use them. He's sincere, he's enthusiastic, he's communicating well, but most of the people at the mall walk right by him without the slightest bit of interest. No one seems very excited about buying a bright orange life jacket at the mall today. But now imagine you're on that cruise ship that sank off the coast of Italy or the Korean cruise ship that sank taking some 300 students to their death. Imagine a steward holding up that same orange life jacket. It doesn't matter how good a communicator he is or how much charisma he possesses. Every person listens to that steward then and everyone wants a bright orange life jacket then.

Offering Jesus to people is a bit like that. A life jacket's an unnecessary accessory until your boat starts to sink. You don't even notice a fire extinguisher hanging on a wall until you see flames and smell smoke. A Bible can be a coffee table decoration until a great crisis slams into your family. And Jesus can be an unnecessary Savior until you run into some kind of major storm or brick wall in life and you suddenly realize you're not going to make it on your own. Sometimes you just need to hang around the edges of people's lives until that moment when they realize their awesome need of a Savior. It may well be then – at that moment – that God will allow you to address their spiritual lostness. Are you ready for the opportunity? Are you willing for God to use you then?

On September 11, 2001, Al Braca began his workday at his office on the 104th floor of One World Trade Center. He loved God and he was a committed follower of Jesus Christ. Sometimes, frankly, Al Braca hated his job. He'd been a vice president and bond broker for Cantor Fitzgerald for 16 years. At the time, Cantor Fitzgerald was a high-powered brokerage firm where power and money were all important. Things like marriage, kids and God were a low priority. Many days Al hated going to work. Co-workers disrespected his faith on many occasions in many creative ways. Even though there were times when he wanted to quit, he felt the Lord telling him to stay, so he did.

Al Braca was a vibrant witness to his co-workers. Many of Al's coworkers called him "the Rev" - half out of affection, half making fun of him. They noticed, though, that he lived a different life. Al was very open with his colleagues about his faith and what God had done in his life. He was the kind of person who was very real about his faith. He knew that being a Christian didn't protect you from hard times. It meant that you had the faith and strength to get through those hard times. Sure, some co-workers harassed him about his faith, but they were usually the ones who also went to him privately to talk about marriage, work or some other personal problem. They often asked him to pray for them, and he challenged them to also spend time in prayer themselves.

After the first plane hit One World Trade Center about 14 floors below where Al was working, several Cantor Fitzgerald employees called their loved ones and said their

goodbyes. Al's family never got a call that day. In the midst of the chaos, Al tried to call home, but was unable to get through. He got through to an operator, who he asked to tell his family that he loved them. It took a month before his family ever got that message. It turns out, and the story has been confirmed through multiple sources, that Al led a prayer meeting on September 11, 2001 on the 104th floor of One World Trade Center and shared Jesus with as many as fifty people gathered around him in a circle. These were people that Al had prayed for regularly for years without much success. But now they were praying together in their last moments in the Name of Jesus. Some received Jesus as Savior and Lord for the first time. When Al Braca stepped into eternity on September 11, 2001, he brought with him some of those for whom he had prayed for so long. Given the opportunity to share Jesus, that's what Al Braca did.

I hope you never have to face the kind of storm Al Braca had to face. But, regardless of what storms you face, you and I need to remember always what Jesus has done for you. When you do that, it will give you the strength to keep standing strong and to do what's being asked of you. By God's grace and power, stand strong.