

The Suffering ~~Servant~~ Judge

“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water.”

1 Peter 3:18-20

Whenever we do not think God is on our side or does not care because he has not changed our plight, we must be mindful that he suffered to make it possible for us to approach God. His judgment does not come from cold, calculated logic garnered from a law text but from his walk among us. His credentials are his suffering not for his wrong but for ours. He did not come to benefit himself in some way—to receive some honor for after all he is the King of kings and Lord of lords. He judges the living and the dead. His life, teaching and sacrifice form the basis for our hope. “By his wounds we are healed” (see Isaiah 53:5). Before we accuse God of not caring, we must take a glimpse at the one suspended between heaven and earth. Nails did not anchor him to that wooden cross but his love. In praying for “this cup to pass from him,” he asked for another way out for us, but our need for him and only him held him to that old, rugged cross.

His proclamation of our freedom extends to those who disobeyed God so long ago. No mention is made that the “spirits in prison” ever receive an offer of salvation—only Noah and those obedient to God receive salvation. *“With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you; but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. For this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does”* (1 Peter 4:4-6). The Gentiles cannot imagine why we do not join them in their lifestyle. Christ proclaims to the living and dead that he alone is *the* Judge. While they held sway over God’s people for a time, their failure to obey God has placed them in an inescapable jail—imprisoned by their own passions. Their regard for self rather than caring for their fellowman has brought them to this end.

In response to humanity’s near wholesale devotion to vice, God waits patiently for Noah to finish constructing the ark. In the face of mankind’s love for immorality, God remains calm and collected. Some languages express this idiomatically as ‘to remain seated in one’s heart’. While the Genesis clearly points out how their behavior brought out a terrifying aspect to God’s anger, God remains calm, cool and collected. If God were the angry, vengeful deity that unbelievers may wish to paint of God, would he have waited a hundred years to wreak havoc when all he needs to do is destroy the world and start it all over again? Could he not have merely imposed his will on humanity if he truly did not care for us—taking our free will from us?

Peter points to Noah as one who suffered the abuse of an entire generation. Building a large seagoing vessel in a land-locked area tends to draw attention. Stocking it with what might well have been the first zoo ever built probably raised more than a few eyebrows. *“By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith”* (Hebrews 11:7). Peter’s reference to Noah as a preacher or herald of righteousness would not have endeared him to his peers (2 Peter 2:5). As much as we would like to think no one suffers as much as we have, Peter points us to Christ and Noah who endured abuse we cannot imagine. God did not fail them and he will not fail us. It may take longer than we would like, but God will rescue us.

Steve Davis