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1 Peter 3:19–4:6

Fourteenth Message

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THE DAWN'S EARLY LIGHT

SERIES: A PILGRIM'S LIFE IN AN ALIEN LAND

Today, May 20, 1990, is a significant day in the history of Romania. After a generation of Communist rule, the first free elections are being held there. When a member of our body was in Romania in January, the Christian brothers there gave him a memento of the freedom they now enjoy—a Romanian flag with the symbol of communism cut out of the middle of it. What a difference the last five months have made to an oppressed people!

I received a letter from a friend named David, a 33-year-old Romanian doctor, telling me about the newness of everything in that country. The last time I was with him we had to part in tears and haste because the security police had discovered our campsite. The tension was so great that it was difficult to enjoy your fellowship. Nevertheless, our love relationship was deepening.

When we discovered that the police had set up a roadblock outside the camp, our team decided it was necessary to leave immediately without our brothers. Before we left the fellowship meal to hike out, I taught them our American symbol, the victory sign. As the four of us left the hill, we were deeply moved when the whole crowd of Romanians raised their hands in victory, a symbol that some day vindication would come for their suffering.

Vindication is Peter's theme in the text we will study this morning. The apostle declares that if we as pilgrims live righteous lives, that will eliminate much suffering. He tells us, however, that if we suffer for the sake of righteousness, we have the privilege of reenacting the passion play before a hostile world. It is a drama that has no minor parts. We all have the great privilege of playing the lead role, that of Christ in his suffering.

Yet, we wonder, will God vindicate his people? And if so, when? And how can we be certain?

In answering these questions, Peter shifts his focus from the cross to the resurrection of Christ. In verse 18 he wrote, "For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust..." His was the perfect sacrifice, unlike the Old Testament sacrifices that had to be repeated if the sinner was to be justified. Jesus is the King from heaven, the perfect sacrifice, the Redeemer who has secured victory over evil.

Peter now goes on to tell Christians about their vindication. The resurrection inaugurates a new age in time. It is as if the dawn has come, and the light has broken into the darkness. As the sun becomes brighter over the horizon, we not only see the light with our eyes, but we begin to feel the heat and the warmth. Our understanding moves from the mind to the heart; and our heart is enlarged to embrace the resurrection life of the age to come.

I. The First Rays of Light: The Resurrection (3:19-20)

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, in which 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, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water. (1 Pet 3:18-20 NASB)

Will God vindicate his people? In the resurrection, Jesus is proclaimed the victor over evil, and to demonstrate that victory, Peter focuses on the

two great world judgments: the flood of Noah's day, and the great judgment to come.

The Interpretive Problem

This text contains several interpretive problems which scholars and commentators have wrestled with through the centuries. The problems center around three questions in the text. First, who are the spirits that Christ made proclamation to? Are they the spirits of men who died in the days of the flood? Or are they the angels of Genesis 6 who left their proper abode, cohabited with women and created a demonic race of human beings?

Secondly, when did Christ preach to them? Augustine, among other scholars, thought that this happened in the days of Noah. First Peter 1 says that the spirit of Christ was preaching through the Old Testament prophets, and Noah himself was a preacher of righteousness. Thus, the idea is that the spirit of Christ was in Noah and God was giving his generation a chance to repent through his preaching of the gospel. I believe there is weight to that argument. On the other hand, the apostolic creed says that Christ in his disembodied state between his death and resurrection descended into hell to preach to these spirits. The creed says that Jesus, having died, "descended into Hades." A third alternative says that the expression "being made alive in the spirits" refers to his resurrection life. Having been put to death in the flesh, Jesus was raised, and in that state he preached triumph to the demonic rebels of Noah's day.

The third question revolves around the issue of what did Christ preach. Did he preach repentance through Noah, or a second chance of salvation to men (or spirits) of Noah's day; or thirdly, a proclamation of victory over the demonic rebels of Noah's day?

With these three questions one can come up with more than a few possibilities of interpretation for the whole passage. With so many possibilities Martin Luther said of this text, "This is (such) a mysterious text and dark saying—as only one of a kind in the New Testament—that I am not sure what St. Peter means." Five hundred years later, I too have to say that I am not sure what St. Peter means.

Interpretive Method: Challenge to Think!

As students of the Bible, we should be like scientists in the way we approach a text that is unclear. I will present the method I use to interpret such texts to develop a theology. First, we must gather all the data so that our conclusions will be as accurate as possible. A common mistake people make is that they gather only part of the data, become excited about what it appears to be saying, and then they build a system on half-truth. It may fit a presupposition, but it does not do justice to the author's intent since it does not utilize all the data. The second thing we must do is analyze the information. In this particular text, the data can be read differently. The problem is, how do we take the data to build a coherent system? In order to do that, we must make assumptions about the data. We must weight the data differently, and from that build a system of theology.

In this study, I will give you my assumptions and how I weight the data. Since there is no pope in the Protestant tradition, I will give you the evidence and let you decide. From the outset, I must tell you the discovery process is fraught with difficulty. I worked on this passage for several months, and published my findings in a study book. I was not convinced that my point of view was correct however, so I read another study that I knew would speak to a different perspective. The author's argument is

quite good, and I see that I may have to rethink my premises. However, I will explain how I came to my conclusions.

First, I give clear text priority over unclear texts of scripture. It is not right to build a doctrine on an unclear text and use that to overrule what is clear in the scriptures. For instance, there is no evidence in scripture that anyone can receive a second chance in hell to repent. Thus, I do not think that Christ preached a second chance to people. The clear text states that if sinners did not believe Moses they would not believe a man if he were raised from the dead. So first, allow clear text to rule over unclear text. Additionally, we must not build a doctrine on one verse of scripture. All important doctrines in scripture come from many texts so they can clearly lead the believer to maturity. Therefore, do not use this passage exclusively to build a doctrine.

Secondly, I allow context to be a determining factor. Regardless of what Peter means by these angels and Jesus' preaching, it is important to determine the meaning in this context. How does this affect the pilgrim who suffers and hungers for his vindication? Context will help us come to a more accurate understanding. Thirdly, to find coherence, I look for grammatical clues in the text which hold the theme together. In this text, there is a grammatical clue I will disclose later. Finally, if in following this method one is able to find a coherent interpretation for an unclear text, we must not be dogmatic about our conclusions. In this case good expositors end up with what I think are two valid possibilities because they weight the same data differently.

Grammatical Structure Provides Unity and Coherence

I believe the key expression in this text is found in the verb "*he went.*" It is used three times, twice regarding Jesus. First it says he went in his resurrection state and preached (v. 19); and secondly, "*having gone into heaven*" (v. 22). It is then applied to us in 4:3, translated "having pursued." Putting these verses together, Peter points out that though man rejected Christ in his suffering, and the devil tried to destroy him, when Christ's suffering is complete ("It is finished"), God vindicates him. This is demonstrated in the resurrection. In the Spirit, Christ proclaims victory over the darkest angelic hosts who were kept in bondage after the flood. Finally, in the ascension, he is seated above all powers, dominions and authorities. The present reality is that as believers embrace this new life we too overcome evil because we no longer travel down the same wicked road we once *went*. That is the common thread that ties the text together. Regardless whether Christ is preaching to men or spirits in prison, victory has come and it transforms our lives from evil to righteousness.

Context and Clear Texts: Identify the Spirits

Regarding these spirits, let me summarize what I think are the clearer texts that identify these spirits. A passage from 2 Peter 2:4,5,9 gives us all the themes mentioned in this text, and with more detail:

For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment; and did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a preacher of righteousness, with seven others, when He brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly...then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment. (2 Pet 2:4-5, 9)

From this passage it is clear that there are angels who have sinned and have been cast into a pit reserved for judgment. Likewise, Jude 6 says, "And angels who did not keep their own domain but abandoned their proper abode, He has kept in eternal bonds under darkness for the judgment of the great day."

There are also parallels in the Jewish writings of Peter's day with which Christians would have been familiar. Genesis 5:24 says, "And Enoch walked with God, and was no more, for God took him." The Jews speculated about what happened to Enoch after God took him. The book of 1 Enoch proposes that he went to the place of the fallen angels of Genesis 6 that were kept under judgment: "Beyond that abyss I saw a place which had no firmament of the heaven above, and no firmly founded earth beneath it: there was no water upon it, and no birds, but it was a waste

and horrible place" (18:12). The book of 2 Enoch describes it as being up in the second heaven.

Perhaps the apostle uses that same language to say it is Christ, not Enoch, who has a mission over evil. His mission far outstrips and transcends the journey tradition gives to Enoch: "Christ is the true Enoch: he walks with God and is taken up to be with his heavenly Father. Not Enoch, but Christ, is the one who confronts the angelic and demonic forces of evil."¹

These pieces of information are the evidence I use to identify the spirits. I reiterate that my conclusions are not free of difficulty. There are others who say these spirits are the men to whom Noah preached, and it was the spirit of Christ preaching to them in the days of the flood. Regardless of which route you take, the outcome is sure—Christ is vindicated over all evil!

The Flood in the Days of Noah

Peter reminds these Christians of the days before the flood when evil was overwhelming, it was a time of such wickedness that demonic hordes intermarried with women and produced a race of half-god, half-human, demonic beings. The author of Genesis comments on the state of mankind's heart, saying, "Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." (Gen. 6:5)

Here were the darkest days of human history, when all was evil and the demons had their way. And the remnant was much smaller (only eight!) than Peter's day. In his sovereignty, God preserved a tiny remnant of eight people in the ark, so when judgment destroyed mankind, eight were saved. That is the vindication that salvation brought. Peter brings us to the present reality by saying that the physical judgment of water is a *type* of the judgment to come. It is truth for our day as well. Are you fearful of evil, wicked men or demons? Are you fearful of the flesh in your own life? Or are you fearful of corrupt governments? Peter tells us not to fear because God has pronounced victory, and judgment is coming.

II. The Glory of the Morning: The Ascension (3:21-22)

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.

A. The Judgment to Come

The reason for judgment is the same as when the first judgment was given: "The intent of man's heart is evil from his youth" (Gen 8:21). This time the means of judgment will not be flood, but fire. Then, the Lord will destroy not only the earth, but heaven as well. As with Noah's judgment, however, there is a delay. We must not interpret the delay to mean that God has lost control. On the contrary, it is to demonstrate his compassion. Peter says,

...by the word of God the heavens existed long ago and the earth was formed out of water and by water, through which the world at that time was destroyed, being flooded with water. But the present heavens and earth by His word are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. (2 Pet 3:5-10)

Like Noah's day, there is a way of escape—through baptism. When we are placed into Christ as believers, we are preserved in the real ark. We are placed into Christ by an appeal to a "clear conscience," which is the individual's choice to make Jesus Christ Lord. We can then enter the real

ark (Christ) and be saved through his resurrection, which is the eighth day (just as there were eight people preserved in the ark).

B. The Vindication of the Suffering of Christ

While this passage has presented interpreters with major problems, it is apparent that opposition from man or demon cannot thwart God's vindication of his servants. We see evidence in the resurrection of Christ when he is sent in his resurrected state to announce victory over these demons. Evidence is also seen in the ascension when he is given authority over all powers on earth.

In America, our freedom has been taken to such extremes that it has become licentiousness, and that is opening this nation up to more and more activity of demons, worldly thinking, and the false philosophy of the New Age. Even in our own church I know of a family whose relative was abused by a demonic cult many years ago when she was a young girl. Although this woman and her husband are Christians, this demonic cult has vowed to kill her in a ritual sacrifice because she knows too much. The FBI agents, who are not even Christians, believe the threats and in the power of demons. To harass this couple and display their power, the cult stole their dog, sacrificed it, and sent the animal parts back to them in the mail. Imagine the fear this couple lives in!

Yet the text takes us to the truth that Christ is victor for all time, as he triumphed over the demons and the evil forces that would ruin us. The blood of Christ sets us free. As he has been vindicated, we too are vindicated with him. Thus, we must not fear, but continue in prayer for endurance so we can enter into the life of the dawn. Although justice may delay, it is not because God has lost control, but because he desires repentance from those who oppose him. Count his slowness as love.

The key to this passage is that the dawn has come and we are to live in the light of that dawn. Elizabeth Rowe wrote in 1737,

One glance from thee, one piercing ray,
Would kindle darkness into day,
The veil of night is no disguise
Nor screen from thy all-searching eyes;
Thro' midnight shades thou find'st thy way
As in the blazing noon of day.²

The dawn has come, so live in the light. See not only with the mind's eye, but allow it to fill the soul and warm the heart with its heat.

When our team gathered together in Romania, we wanted to give the denomination there a gift. We thought that the most meaningful present we could give them was a book of poems by Traian Dorz, a Romanian believer who was imprisoned 16 years for his faith. There, in the darkness and gloom of evil, the fight broke into his cell and the resurrected Christ lived with him. In the light of God's glory, he composed ten thousand hymns to Christ. We watched and listened as these people sang these poems in our times together, and it reminded us of King David's psalms. In their depression over their evil circumstances, their hearts responded to the truth, and they were transposed to the heavenly reality. So we smuggled these poems out of the country, and printed five thousand copies. We did not know how to get the books back in the country until the revolution took place in December. What joy to be able to hand them to these people without smuggling them in! One of our men is convinced that God started the revolution so we could get our hymnals into the country!

Thus, Peter tells us to live in the light of the dawn, and it will change our souls. Resurrection life will dispel the darkness.

III. The Warmth of Noonday: Resurrection Life in the Soul (4:1-6)

Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose [insight], that he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, 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. 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. 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. For the gospel has for this purpose 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.

A. It Purges the Pilgrim of Sin

How does the light that I see with my eye get into my heart to warm my soul so that the resurrection life of the age to come permeates my being? To the Christians in Peter's time who endured in the midst of persecution and great trial under the Roman Empire, the apostle discloses the secret that shines light into their hearts—it is unjust suffering. The thing they feared would destroy them, says Peter, is the very thing that puts this light in the heart.

The apostle declares, "Arm yourself with this insight, that he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin." Dead men do not sin. Christ suffered in the flesh, died and was resurrected to a higher plane, and now he lives to the will of God. Resurrection life is now in our hearts, and suffering in the flesh causes us to appropriate that new life. That which we fear and hate is the very thing that gives us life on a higher plane and purges us from sin.

The phrase "has ceased" does not mean that suffering delivers us from the power of sin or its guilt, for Christ accomplished that on the cross. Rather, suffering unjustly and responding rightly causes the believer to appropriate what Christ has already done for him, and reduces the power of temptation in his life to do sinful acts. This is not the teaching of perfectionism (a position that says it is possible to do away with the presence of sin), but it is saying that loving one's enemies through the power of the Spirit transforms the believer's soul. It so enlarges the heart to embrace the love of Christ, that the world's allurements seem insignificant in comparison.

B. It Sets the Pilgrim on a New Road with New Affections (4:2-3)

...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. 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.

As Christ "went" to the spirits in prison to proclaim victory, and then "went" to heaven after his suffering, so now the pilgrim is set on a new road through his suffering. We are now following after Christ, and therefore we are no longer traveling on the road we once "went." I believe the Lord must view the world and its affections much like we view tag-team wrestling. There is melodrama and excitement, but not much substance. Likewise, our affections are all idols, and yet we love them. But God designed us to live on a much higher plane—to love that which is eternal. When we sacrifice the reality of heavenly gifts for idolatry—drunkenness, drugs, pornography, sexual immorality—our affections are revealed as shallow self-indulgence.

I experienced two momentous events in 1975 that contrasted worldly and eternal affections. First, Emily and I became homeowners in this valley, where it takes an absolute miracle to do so. Starting with \$500 in the bank, God handed my wife and me \$9,000 in just two days for a down payment on a brand new condominium. What joy we felt as we walked through this new place that smelled of new carpeting and paneling! Shortly thereafter, however, we had a son who died soon after his birth. The change in my affections toward that condominium was dramatic. In the death of our son I experienced God's compassionate love so deeply through the saints of this church that my affections were now directed totally toward God, and my affection for the condominium dwindled. As a result, we saw a new capacity for the love of God.

Suffering not only quickens the soul to life, but it also sensitizes the soul to death. Old ways now appear for what they are—empty and

vain—and there is a revulsion to old practices. William Law wrote astutely in 1726, “For when we are at the top of human attainments we are still at the bottom of human misery...ask why should you enter such a rat race,” reflection causes you to “leave the broad way and let the wise and learned, the rich and the great go mad by themselves.”³ What we once held in high regard no longer has much meaning when it is compared to the love of Jesus Christ. Elizabeth Rowe wrote, “I have waited for thee as they that wait for the morning.’...How undone was I without thee! In vain, while thou wast absent, the world hath tried to entertain me; all it could offer was like jests of dying men, or like recreations to the damned.”⁴

After a Super Bowl victory a few years ago, a Christian athlete on the winning team was interviewed as part of the post-game festivities. Bubbling with enthusiasm, the newsmen asked, “Isn’t this the greatest moment in your life!” The football player said, “No, I wouldn’t even rank it among the top three.” What an example of renewed affections for Christ!

C. It Gives the Pilgrim a New Focus (4:4-6)

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. For the gospel has for this purpose 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.

When we suffer for righteousness, our new affections enable us to live on a higher plane. No longer are we the marionettes of men, because our focus is no longer on men. From childhood on, we strived to please our parents, and then our spouse or our boss, but we never knew if we had done enough to deserve their love. But when we suffer for righteousness sake, all the strings are cut and we are no longer pulled in a hundred directions. We are released to look only toward, our heavenly Father to obtain absolute freedom in the light of his love. The world slanders us when we live this way because we do not run with them in their dissipation.

In the first century, it was difficult for a Christian to socialize with the Gentile world because everything the world did was absolute wickedness and idolatry. One writer says, “The Christians were compelled to stand aloof from so much of the social pleasure of the world, that the Gentiles bitterly resented their puritanism, regarding them as enemies of all joy and therefore of the human race.” In those days, for example, if your friend had season tickets to the “games,” it was more likely than not that you would witness Christians being thrown to the lions. If a Gentile said, “Let’s go to the temple to worship,” that was actually an invitation to a sexual orgy. There was no joy in their activity, only revulsion and greater darkness. So the Christians had to remain aloof from these wicked activities, and therefore they suffered slander. These pilgrims were sustained because they no longer focused on the world, but on the God who ultimately judges. It produced fear in their hearts while giving them hope for the future. Looking beyond the veil of history they saw a table set for a feast. There saw all their friends who had been martyred, forever vindicated in glorified bodies, serving to the will of God. They looked to that new party in heaven, and continued to grow in hope.

The great contrast between pagan despair and Christian hope may be seen in their graveyards. J. B. Lightfoot contrasts the inscriptions on the magnificent tombs of the heathen and the poor graves of the Christians who were buried in the Christian catacombs. He writes, “On the one hand there is the dreary wail of despair, the effect of which is only heightened by the pomp of outward splendor from which it issues. On the other the exulting psalm of hope, shining the more brightly in ill-written, ill-spelt records amidst the darkness of subterranean caverns.” The early Christians had nothing materially, yet they lived in the light of the dawn, and the dawn so warmed their hearts that the heat of it expanded their

affections and purged them of sin to love God. Set on an entirely new road, they no longer traveled on the course they once went.

Is there vindication? Absolutely! It is in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. So live in the light, for it is dawn.

I would like to close by reading a very special letter from my Romanian, friend, David. It summarizes this wonderful theme of affections in a way that only one who knows vindication could:

April 8, 1990

Dear Brian, Arthur, Judy, and Wendy,

From summer till now have happened so much events that I do not know with which to begin to tell you. Because I write so badly English, I can’t tell you too many.

We are living now in a more free country, but not completely freely, although many people are dead for liberty.

I hope although the communism which kept us like in a prison will be soon completely destroyed. By the hands of the people, God killed Ceaucescu but behind him our country is really a ruin. I am afraid that after God [has caused us to] escape from the Babylon of communism the people will forget that God did it. I pray God to help our people to understand that we must glorify Him all our life for this escape.

At the beginning I believed the revolution will clean all bad things. But perhaps I claim too much from this world. I had forgotten that in this world God sent us as lambs in the midst of wolves, and for us only in heaven will we be really well.

I was deeply moved in my heart when I received from you the envelopes [of pictures, poems, and teaching materials]. This reminded me of those dangerous days when we were together, but which remained in my heart the best days in that summer. At our departure your lifted hands in the sign of victory and your eyes fill of tears shining of God’s grace remained forever in my soul. In the days of the revolution [December 1989] the sign of the victory returned to me from all our people and I saw in all of them your hands. This was too much for me.

Arthur and Judy, we miss you so much. If I can, I want to visit you in America. I want so much to see your country and your home, and your church. For I have heard much about your country. We thank you and all the brothers who have contributed to send us the book of poems which are the best present for our church.

Let us hope that in this summer we will be again at the Gamaliel’s feet and God will bless us all.

Greet all the brothers for us with a Holy Kiss.

David.

What encouragement in the midst of unjust suffering! May God smite us with it so that we might indeed enter into this higher life, to be purged from our sinful pleasures, set on a new road with new affections, and focused on our one Supreme Judge. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

1. Edmund Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994), 161. See this for an excellent treatment of the different views of this passage.

2. Elizabeth Rowe, *Devout Exercises of the Heart* (1737), in David L. Jeffrey, ed., *A Burning and a Shining Light: English Spirituality in the Age of Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 105.

3. William Law, *A Practical Treatise Upon Christian Perfection* (1726), in Jeffrey, *Burning and Shining Light*, 123-124.

4. Rowe, *Devout Exercises*, 106.