

The Books of 1 and 2 Peter, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 6: Suffering for Righteousness; Baptism Saves

1 Peter 3:8–22

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

First Peter 3:8–22 is one of the most doctrinally loaded passages in the letter, and verse 21, “baptism... now saves you,” is one of the central baptism texts in all of Scripture. Be ready to teach it with confidence. Peter says plainly that baptism saves, not as mere outward washing (“not as a removal of dirt from the body”) but as “an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” This is exactly the New Testament pattern: baptism is the God-appointed moment when, through faith in the working of God, the penitent believer contacts the saving death and resurrection of Christ and receives the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38; Acts 22:16; Romans 6:3–4; Colossians 2:12). Present baptism not as a mere symbol added after salvation, but as the appeal to God through which the resurrection of Christ saves the believer. At the same time, guard against any notion that the water itself is magic; it saves precisely because it joins us, in faith, to the risen Christ.

The passage also contains the famously difficult mention of Christ proclaiming to “the spirits in prison” who were disobedient “in the days of Noah” (vv. 19–20). Handle this with care and humility. Whatever the precise meaning, two things must be clear. First, this text does not teach purgatory or a second chance for salvation after death; Scripture elsewhere is plain that judgment follows death (Hebrews 9:27; Luke 16:26). Second, Peter’s point in context is the triumph of Christ: the same Christ who was put to death was made alive and proclaimed victory, and is now exalted at God’s right hand with all powers subject to Him (v. 22). Do not let a difficult, secondary detail eclipse the clear and central message: Christ suffered to bring us to God, baptism unites us to Him, and He reigns triumphant. Teach the clear things clearly and hold the obscure things humbly.

Pastorally, the passage is addressed to people suffering for doing right, and it forms them in two directions: outward, in how they treat enemies and bear witness with gentleness and respect, and inward, in a clear conscience and a fearless hope grounded in the reign of Christ. Aim to leave students assured of what their baptism into Christ means, equipped to give a gentle reason for their hope, and steadied by the triumph of the Savior who suffered once for sins and now reigns over every power.

Question 1

Student Question:

Peter calls believers to “unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind,” and to bless rather than repay evil for evil (vv. 8–9). What does this teach about how

Christians are to treat one another and their enemies, and why does Peter say we were “called” to this so that we “may obtain a blessing”?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Peter sketches the inner life of a healthy church in five words: unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, a humble mind. These are not vague sentiments but the actual texture of life together. Unity of mind is shared conviction and purpose; sympathy feels with one another; brotherly love treats the church as family; a tender heart is moved by others' pain; a humble mind refuses to exalt itself.

Then Peter extends the same spirit outward, even to enemies: “Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless.” This is the way of Jesus, who blessed those who cursed Him. To bless an enemy is to actively seek their good and call down God's favor on them, which is humanly impossible without grace and is therefore a clear mark of the Spirit's work.

Note the motive Peter gives: “that you may obtain a blessing.” The one who blesses is himself blessed. Returning evil for evil chains us to the offense and the offender; blessing frees us and opens us to God's own blessing. Refusing to retaliate is not weakness; it is the strength of those who have entrusted the outcome to God who judges justly (1 Peter 2:23).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The marks of healthy church life: unity, sympathy, brotherly love, tenderness, humility
- Blessing enemies as the way of Christ (Luke 6:27–28; Romans 12:14)
- Refusing retaliation as strength rooted in trust in God
- The blessing that comes to those who bless rather than curse

Discussion Prompts

- Which of the five qualities in verse 8 is most missing in the church today?
- What does it actually mean to ‘bless’ someone who has wronged you?
- How does blessing an enemy free the one who blesses?

Question 2

Student Question:

Of the qualities Peter lists in verse 8, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, a humble mind, which is hardest for you to show consistently, and toward whom? What would growth in that area look like this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns Peter's list into a mirror. It is easy to admire unity, sympathy, brotherly love, tenderness, and humility in the abstract and quite another thing to show them toward a specific, difficult person. Press students to be concrete about both the quality and the person.

Help them see that these qualities are not personality traits but fruit to be cultivated. A naturally blunt person can grow in tenderness; a proud person can learn humility; a guarded person can learn sympathy. The Spirit forms these in us as we yield to Him and practice them deliberately.

Move toward one act of growth. Ask each student to name the hardest quality and the hardest person, and one specific way they will practice it this week, a word of sympathy actually spoken, a humble apology offered, a tender response chosen over a cutting one.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christian character as cultivated fruit, not fixed temperament (Galatians 5:22-23)
- The Spirit's work in forming tenderness and humility
- Growth shown in concrete acts toward specific people
- Honest self-examination as the start of change

Discussion Prompts

- Which quality from verse 8 is hardest for you, and toward whom?
- What is one concrete way you could practice it this week?
- How have you seen God grow a quality in you that did not come naturally?

Question 3

Student Question:

Quoting Psalm 34, Peter says the one who would "love life and see good days" must "keep his tongue from evil," "turn away from evil and do good," and "seek peace and pursue it" (vv. 10-11). What does this teach about the connection between the way we speak and act and the life God blesses?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Peter quotes Psalm 34 to ground his ethic in older Scripture. The one who would "love life and see good days" must first "keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit." The tongue comes first because so much good and evil between people travels through it. A church can be wrecked or healed by how its members speak.

Then the psalm widens to conduct: "turn away from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it." Notice the active verbs. Peacemaking is not passive avoidance of conflict but an energetic pursuit; we are to chase peace down, to work for it. The good life God blesses is a life of guarded speech, active goodness, and pursued peace.

Make the connection explicit. Peter is not promising a trouble-free life as a reward for good behavior; the very next verses speak of suffering for righteousness. He is describing the kind of life that is truly good in God's eyes and under God's favor, whatever the circumstances. The blessed life is a holy life, not necessarily an easy one.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The power of the tongue for good and evil (James 3:1-12)
- Active goodness and the energetic pursuit of peace (Romans 12:18; Matthew 5:9)
- The blessed life defined by holiness, not ease
- The continuity of God's ethic across the Psalms and the New Testament

Discussion Prompts

- How does your speech most help or harm the people around you?
- What does it look like to 'pursue' peace rather than merely avoid conflict?
- Why is the good life God blesses not the same as an easy life?

Question 4

Student Question:

Peter says we should keep our conscience clear and our conduct good so that those who revile us will be "put to shame" (v. 16). Is there an area where your conduct could be honestly criticized right now? What would it take to keep a truly clear conscience before God and others?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Peter ties witness to conscience: keep "a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame." A clear conscience is a powerful thing under attack; when accusers cannot find any real fault, their slander eventually collapses on itself.

Help students examine honestly. A good conscience is not the same as a comfortable conscience; some people have silenced theirs. The goal is a conscience that is clear because the life is actually clean, before God first and then before others. Ask where, if anyone looked closely, their conduct could be justly criticized.

Point to the way back to a clear conscience: confession, repentance, restitution where needed, and renewed obedience. The blood of Christ cleanses the conscience (Hebrews 9:14), and a believer who keeps short accounts with God can face slander without flinching, because the accusations simply are not true.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- A clear conscience as a defense under slander

- The difference between a clear conscience and a silenced one
- The cleansing of the conscience by the blood of Christ (Hebrews 9:14)
- Keeping short accounts with God through ongoing repentance

Discussion Prompts

- Is there an area where your conduct could be justly criticized right now?
- What would it take to restore a truly clear conscience there?
- How does a clean life disarm those who slander you?

Question 5

Student Question:

Peter says, “Even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed,” and “it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God’s will, than for doing evil” (vv. 14, 17). What does this teach about suffering that comes from doing right, and how should a Christian face it differently from suffering that comes from doing wrong?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Peter draws a sharp distinction between two kinds of suffering. Suffering “for righteousness’ sake,” because we did what was right, is blessed; suffering for doing evil is simply the consequence of sin. The same pain can mean very different things depending on its cause.

Explore why suffering for doing good is called blessed. It aligns us with Christ, who suffered though He did no wrong; it bears witness to a watching world; and it is precious in God’s sight (1 Peter 2:20). Such suffering is not a sign that God has abandoned us but, paradoxically, a sign that we are walking in His steps.

Help students face it without fear. Peter says, “Have no fear of them, nor be troubled.” The Christian who suffers for doing right can hold his head up before God and man; there is a clean dignity in it. Suffering for doing wrong, by contrast, calls not for courage but for repentance. Discerning which kind we face changes how we respond.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The crucial distinction between suffering for righteousness and suffering for wrongdoing
- Suffering for good as fellowship with the suffering Christ (1 Peter 2:21)
- Such suffering as blessed and precious in God’s sight
- Fearlessness grounded in a clear conscience and God’s favor

Discussion Prompts

- How should a Christian face suffering that comes from doing right?
- Why does Peter call suffering for righteousness ‘blessed’?

- How do you tell the difference between this and suffering from your own wrongdoing?

Question 6

Student Question:

Peter says, “Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy” (vv. 14–15). When you face opposition or the possibility of suffering for your faith, what are you most tempted to fear, and how does honoring Christ as Lord in your heart drive out that fear?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Peter addresses fear head-on: “Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy.” The antidote to the fear of man is the honoring of Christ as Lord in the heart. When Christ is supreme in our affections, the threats of others shrink to their true size.

Help students name what they actually fear when faced with opposition for their faith, rejection, ridicule, loss of job or friendship, awkwardness, conflict. Most of our silence about Christ is rooted in some specific fear that we have never named. Bringing it into the light is the first step to mastering it.

Show how enthroning Christ drives out fear. To honor Christ as Lord in the heart is to settle, before the moment of testing, that He is more important than the thing we fear to lose. The martyrs were not fearless by temperament; they had simply decided that Christ outweighed everything, and that decision freed them. Ask students what they would have to settle in their hearts to face their particular fear.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Honoring Christ as Lord in the heart as the antidote to the fear of man (Proverbs 29:25)
- Naming our fears as the path to overcoming them
- Settling Christ’s supremacy before the moment of testing
- Courage as the fruit of right affections, not natural temperament

Discussion Prompts

- What do you most fear when you face opposition for your faith?
- What would it mean to ‘honor Christ as Lord’ in your heart at that moment?
- What do you need to settle in advance so fear does not silence you?

Question 7

Student Question:

Peter says to be ready to give “a reason for the hope that is in you,” yet always “with gentleness and respect” (vv. 15–16). Why does Peter insist that the manner of our witness, gentle and respectful, matters as much as the content, and how can a harsh defense of the truth actually undermine the gospel?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Peter insists that the manner of our witness matters: give a reason for your hope “with gentleness and respect.” The content of the gospel is non-negotiable, but the tone is not optional. We are to defend the truth as people who honor the dignity of those we speak to, not as people scoring points.

Show how harshness undermines the gospel. When we defend the truth with contempt, sarcasm, or arrogance, we contradict with our spirit the very Christ we proclaim with our words. People may lose an argument and still walk away certain that Christians are unkind. Gentleness and respect make the gospel believable; harshness makes it repellent, even when every word is technically correct.

Connect tone to the clear conscience of verse 16. The reason we can be gentle is that we are not fighting for our own honor but pointing to Christ; we can afford to be kind because we are not defending ourselves. Ask students where their witness has been more combative than gentle, and how they might speak the same truth in a way that adorns it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The manner of witness (gentleness and respect) as essential, not optional (Colossians 4:6)
- Harshness contradicting the gospel it defends
- The dignity of every hearer as an image-bearer
- Gentleness flowing from confidence in Christ rather than self-defense

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Peter insist on gentleness and respect, not just correct content?
- How can a harsh defense of truth actually drive people from Christ?
- Where has your witness been more combative than gentle?

Question 8

Student Question:

Peter assumes Christians have a “hope” so real and visible that outsiders will ask about it (v. 15). Is your hope in Christ visible enough that anyone would think to ask? What in your life either displays that hope or hides it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question assumes something convicting: that a Christian's hope should be visible enough to prompt the question, "Why are you like this?" Peter expects believers to live such hopeful, steady, joyful lives under pressure that outsiders notice and ask. The defense of our hope begins not with words but with a life that raises the question.

Help students examine whether their hope is on display or in hiding. A hope kept entirely private, never showing in how we face trouble, never altering our priorities or our peace, is hard for anyone to see and therefore hard for anyone to ask about. Sometimes the problem is not that we lack words but that our lives are not raising any questions.

Move toward visibility. Ask each student what in their life currently displays the hope of Christ, and what hides it, anxiety that looks just like everyone else's, complaining, a joyless religion. Then ask for one way to let the hope show this week, so that the door is opened for the gentle, respectful answer Peter describes.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- A visible hope as the precondition of effective witness
- The life that raises the question before the mouth gives the answer
- Joy and steadiness under pressure as evidence of real hope
- Hidden hope versus displayed hope

Discussion Prompts

- Is your hope in Christ visible enough that someone would think to ask about it?
- What in your life displays that hope, and what hides it?
- How could you let your hope show more clearly this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

Peter says, "Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God," and then that "baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you... as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (vv. 18, 21). What is Peter teaching here about the suffering of Christ for our salvation and about the meaning and necessity of baptism, and how should we understand the difficult mention of the "spirits in prison" (vv. 19–20) without drawing wrong conclusions from it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal summit of the lesson and one of the great passages on the cross and on baptism, so give it full weight. Begin with verse 18: "Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God." Here is the heart of the gospel in a sentence. Christ suffered once, a finished and unrepeatable sacrifice; for sins, dealing with the

real problem; the righteous for the unrighteous, the sinless in the place of the guilty; that he might bring us to God, the goal of it all being restored fellowship with the Father. Every word is precious. Linger here before moving to baptism, because baptism means nothing apart from this cross.

Now teach verse 21 plainly: "Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you." Peter says baptism saves. He immediately guards it from two misunderstandings. It is "not as a removal of dirt from the body," so the water is not a magic bath and salvation is not about physical cleansing. It is "an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ." Baptism is the penitent believer's appeal to God, the God-appointed moment when, trusting the working of God, we lay hold of the saving power of Christ's resurrection and rise with a conscience cleansed of guilt. It saves not by the merit of water but because it unites us with the risen Christ. This is the consistent New Testament pattern: Acts 2:38 ties baptism to the forgiveness of sins, Acts 22:16 to the washing away of sins, Romans 6:3-4 to union with Christ's death and resurrection, Colossians 2:12 to being raised with Him through faith. Present baptism, then, not as a mere outward symbol of a salvation already complete, but as the appeal of faith through which God saves. And present it always in the gospel order: the word is heard, Christ is believed and confessed, sin is repented of, and the believer is baptized into Christ, and so the whole work is by grace through an obedient faith.

Handle the flood imagery rightly. Peter says baptism "corresponds to" the way Noah's family was "brought safely through water." The waters of the flood both judged the old world and bore the ark to safety; baptism likewise marks the line between the old life under judgment and the new life in Christ, carrying us safely into a new world. The point is not that water has inherent power but that God saves through the appointed means as people trust and obey Him, just as He did with Noah.

Now address the difficult verses 19 to 20 with humility and caution, and do not let them swallow the lesson. Peter says Christ "went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey... in the days of Noah." Faithful students have read this in more than one way; the exact reference is genuinely difficult and not essential to the passage's main point. Whatever the precise meaning, be clear about what it does not teach. It does not teach purgatory, and it does not teach a second chance to be saved after death; Scripture is plain that it is appointed for man to die once and after that comes judgment (Hebrews 9:27), and that no one crosses the great chasm after death (Luke 16:26). Peter's actual point in context is the triumph of Christ. The same Christ who was "put to death in the flesh" was "made alive in the spirit," proclaimed His victory, and "has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him" (v. 22). Teach the clear center, Christ suffered to bring us to God, baptism unites us to the risen Christ, and Christ now reigns over every power, and hold the obscure detail humbly without building any doctrine on it that the rest of Scripture will not support.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christ's once-for-all, substitutionary suffering, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us to God (Hebrews 10:10)
- Baptism as the God-appointed means that saves, an appeal to God for a good conscience through Christ's resurrection (Acts 2:38; Acts 22:16; Romans 6:3-4; Colossians 2:12)
- Baptism saving not by the water itself but by uniting the penitent believer, in faith, to the risen Christ
- The gospel order: hearing, believing, confessing, repenting, and being baptized into Christ, all by grace through obedient faith
- The 'spirits in prison' passage teaching neither purgatory nor a second chance after death (Hebrews 9:27; Luke 16:26)
- The triumph and present reign of Christ over all angels, authorities, and powers (v. 22)

Discussion Prompts

- How does verse 18 summarize the whole gospel of Christ's saving work?
- What does Peter mean that baptism 'now saves you,' and how is it more than a symbol?
- Why must we be careful not to build doctrines of purgatory or second chances on verses 19-20?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole passage. Peter moves from how we treat others, to suffering for righteousness, to the hope we are ready to share, to Christ's suffering and our baptism, to His exaltation over all powers. Name one specific way Jesus is forming you through these verses. What single truth from 1 Peter 3:8-22 do you most need to carry into this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Gather the threads. Peter has moved from how we treat one another and our enemies, to suffering for righteousness, to a clear conscience and a ready, gentle witness, to the cross, to baptism, and finally to the exalted Christ who reigns over every power. The everyday and the eternal are woven together throughout.

Press for one concrete point of formation. With so much in this passage, the temptation is to leave only impressed. Ask each student to name the single truth they most need and one place it will land this week, whether in how they answer the next insult, how they keep a clear conscience, or how they rest in their baptism into the risen Christ.

Close on verse 22. The Christ who saves us is the Christ who reigns, with all powers subject to Him. Whatever opposition or fear we face, we follow a Lord who already went through death and out the other side and now sits at the right hand of God. Send students out steadied by His triumph.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The integration of daily conduct, suffering, witness, and the saving work of Christ
- Baptism as union with the crucified and risen Lord
- The present reign of the exalted Christ over all powers

Discussion Prompts

- Which single truth from this passage do you most need this week?
- Where do you sense Jesus forming you through 1 Peter 3:8-22?
- How does your baptism into the risen, reigning Christ steady you in hardship?