

Hope When Life is Hard...



A VERSE BY VERSE
EXPOSITION OF
THE EPISTLE OF
FIRST PETER

The Suffering and Triumphant Christ 1 Peter 3:18-22

I could quote a long list of theologians who testify to the difficulty of the passage before us. Suffice to say that this is certainly the most challenging and difficult passage in 1 Peter and, arguably, in the entire New Testament. Martin Luther's words are quoted often in the commentaries: "A wonderful text is this, and a more obscure passage perhaps than any other in the New Testament, so that I do not know for a certainty just what Peter means" (*Peter and Jude*, p. 166). Indeed, Wayne Grudem devotes nearly 20% of his commentary on 1 Peter to these five verses (*1 Peter*, pp. 155-166, 203-239 out of 240 pages of actual commentary). That gives you a hint as to the complexity of the passage that we will now read.

1 Peter 3:18...*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;¹⁹ in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison,²⁰ 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.²¹ 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, ²² who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him.

When Julia and I leave the church campus at the same time we may take different routes home. I may go west on 303 and turn right on Bowen to get home. She may go north on Fielder and west on Park Row. It is not unusual, however, for both of us to arrive at the intersection of Bowen and Park Row at the same time. Similarly, although there are differing interpretations of this text, it is remarkable how most who study it arrive at the same conclusion as to its main thrust - that **the suffering and victory of Christ are our assurance that we will be vindicated at last** (see Clowney, pp. 154-55 on link to 2:21-25). When Christ is revealed it will be shown that God approves the faith and righteous lives of those who are in Christ. It is this assurance of our ultimate victory that is celebrated in this text.

Dr. Clowney says, “[In this passage] Peter presents the suffering Christ as the Victor ... He tells us that Christ who suffered and died and was made alive again, has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand. He is the Conqueror; we share his triumph ... His glorious triumph will give us courage to face our accusers. Undergirding both the meekness and the boldness of the Christian is the saving work of Christ” (pp. 154-155). So, dear friends, don’t be discouraged by the difficulty of this text, rather, be encouraged by the comfort that is found in it; that **the suffering and victory of Christ are our assurance that we will be vindicated at last**.

There are five major views of **1 Peter 3:18-22**. The **first** view is this: “after Christ died, he went and preached to people in hell, offering them a second chance of

salvation” (Grudem, p. 204). Those who believe that all men will be saved (universalists) tend to this view. The **second** view is this: “after Christ died, he went and preached to people in hell, proclaiming to them that he had triumphed over them and their condemnation was final” (Grudem, p. 204). This view has been called the “orthodox Lutheran view” (Grudem, p. 204, footnote 3). The **third** view is this: “after Christ died, he proclaimed release to people who had repented just before they died in the flood, and led them out of their imprisonment in Purgatory into heaven” (Grudem, p. 204). Grudem states that this view “has been common among Roman Catholic interpreters (footnote 4, p. 204).

Here are the two views that merit the most serious consideration. The **first** is that “Christ preached by the Holy Spirit through the lips of Noah to the wicked generation that lived before the flood” (Achtmeier, p. 244). The **second** view is that Christ went to the place where disobedient angelic spirits are imprisoned to proclaim His victory and their doom.

There are, of course, strengths and weaknesses in each view, however, I lean toward the second view – that *the spirits in prison* are fallen angels. The three main considerations that drive my view are (1) the overall **context** of 1 Peter, (2) the **connection** of this passage with 2 Peter 2:4 and Jude 6, and (3) the **clues** in the passage itself.

Indeed, there are four **internal features** of the passage that serve as “clues” to the meaning although not everyone interprets the clues the same way. **First**, *put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit* (3:18) refers to the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. **Second**, the phrase *in which* (3:19) refers back to *in the*

spirit (3:18). Third, although separated by two verses, *having gone* in **verse 22** may supply a key to our understanding of *He went* in **verse 19**. As a matter of fact, these two words are the very same in Greek. The repetition of these provides us with a clue as to the identity of the imprisoned spirits, the content of Christ's proclamation, and the direction of His journey (see Achtemeier, p. 240-41). **Fourth**, *angels and authorities and powers* in **verse 22** may shed light on *the spirits in prison* in **verse 19**.

So let's begin our study in **1 Peter 3:18**...*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.*

For Christ. Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity is the infinite God-man. The gospel is the good news of Christ and His objective work to redeem sinners. Indeed, it was this Christ who **died for sins**. Sin is any want of conformity unto or transgression of the law of God (SC #14). The penalty for such transgression is death. *The wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23). The soul who sins will die (Ezek. 18:4).* Jesus Christ paid the penalty prescribed for violation of God's law. Jesus, the infinitely worthy Son of God dealt with sin **once for all**. **Hebrews 10:10, 12, 14, 18** ¹⁰ *we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all ...* ¹² *but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God ...* ¹⁴ *For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified ...* ¹⁸ *Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin.* And since Jesus had no sin of His own to pay for His death was a substitutionary sacrifice acceptable to God. He died **the just for the unjust**. That's us. And this for the gracious purpose that **He might bring us to God**. **Isaiah 59:2** says, *Your sin has made a separation between you and your God.* Paul says in **Romans 5:10**, *while*

*we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son. And this death was a cruel reality, **being put to death in the flesh.** It was Christ's physical body – the one that could be beaten, broken, bruised, and buried; the one that could bleed – that was nailed to the cross. But death could not hold Him. Indeed, by the power of God Jesus was **made alive in the spirit.** He was raised to life on the third day. It is this Christ who is offered to sinners in the gospel. And if you believe on the Lord Jesus Christ you shall be saved.*

1 Peter 3:19-20a, 22 ¹⁹ *in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison,* ²⁰ *who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark ...* ²² *[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.*

Admittedly **verse 19** is the most difficult in the letter. Paul Achtemeier says, "This verse is one of the shorter, but surely the most problematic, in this letter, if not in the New Testament canon as a whole, and eludes any agreement on its precise meaning" (p. 252). Several commentators have worked through this verse using a question and answer approach. I think this has merit and so I will follow suit.

Verse 19 says *in which [spirit] also He went.* **When did Christ go?** In the days of Noah? Between His death and resurrection? Between His death and ascension? During His ascension? We've already noted that *put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit* refers most naturally to the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. Peter's reference to *the resurrection of Jesus Christ* in **verse 21** seems to reinforce this interpretation. In terms of time it seems that Christ's journey was a post-

resurrection trip rather than a pre-incarnation trip. On the strength of the connection with *having gone into heaven* in **verse 22** I agree that Christ's preaching took place during His ascension.

In which also He went. **Where did Christ go?** Did Christ descend into hell? Did He visit the place some call Purgatory? The land where Noah built his ark? If so, He went in the person of Noah. Given what has just been said relative to the *time* of Christ's preaching I believe that Christ went into heavenly places. Look at *He went* in **verse 19** and *having gone into heaven* in **verse 22**. The assumption is often that Jesus went down. Nothing in the verb requires this understanding. It may be that He went the other way; that the *prison* is in heavenly places not in the bowels of the earth. In other words, it may be that **verse 19** and **verse 22** have the same event in view. Howard Marshall concludes, "Peter is referring to a visit made by Jesus after his resurrection in connection with his ascension to the right hand of God in heaven (v.22). Christ visited the prison of disobedient spirits that is situated in the heavens" (pp. 123-24).

Are there ground for such a view? Well, "the Jews believed that there were several levels or divisions in heaven. Some Jewish writings locate the place where the evil powers are kept in subjection until the final judgment in one of these divisions of heaven" (Marshall, p. 125). Paul hints at such a division when, in **2 Corinthians 12:2**, he mentions *a man in Christ caught up to the third heaven*. **Revelation 12:7-9** speaks of a great angelic war in heaven. Listen to what Paul says in Ephesians. In **1:21** he says that *Christ is seated far above all rule and authority and power and dominion*. In **3:10** he mentions *the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places*. In **6:12** he mentions *our struggle against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of*

wickedness in the heavenly places. “So it is possible that the reference here is to a visit paid by the [ascending] Jesus to a prison in heaven” (Marshall, p. 125).

To whom did Christ go? In other words, who are *the spirits now in prison*? Old Testament believers who have died? Unbelievers who have died? Certainly an initial reading of the text could suggest that they were men who lived during the time of the construction of Noah’s ark. And this, of course, is one of the prime arguments for the view that Christ, through Noah, preached to the unbelievers in Noah’s day.

What about angelic spirits? We sometimes tend to shy away from such explanations on account of their other-worldliness; the realm of angels, demons, and other created beings. The introduction of such an idea is not an intrusion or unwarranted insertion by any means. In this, his first letter, Peter mentions *angels* in **1:12**. He refers to *angels and authorities and powers* in **3:22**. In **5:8** he warns, *your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion*.

In his second letter, **2:4**, Peter says, *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*. Here we see that there were angels who sinned and were banished to a place to await final judgment.

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*.

So it is no stretch to suggest that Peter has angelic *spirits* in mind and that they are *in prison* – this place, this domain, this abode of which both Peter and Jude

speak. “So it is possible that the reference here is to a visit paid by the [ascending] Jesus to a prison in heaven” (Marshall, p. 125) to proclaim victory and judgment to disobedient angelic spirits.

Now, the big problem (some argue) with the angelic spirits view is the supposed shaky connection to the days of Noah as mentioned in **verse 20** (**Note:** 2nd big objection is the “disobedience” of angels. See Clowney, p. 162). But is there a legitimate connection between fallen angels and the days of Noah? Not a few take the position that fallen angels are in view in **Genesis 6:1-4**.

Genesis 6:1-4...*Now it came about, when men began to multiply on the face of the land, and daughters were born to them, ² that the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful; and they took wives for themselves, whomever they chose. ³ Then the LORD said, “My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, because he also is flesh; nevertheless his days shall be one hundred and twenty years.” ⁴ The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men, and they bore children to them. Those were the mighty men who were of old, men of renown. **Note:** see sons of God in Job 1:6, 2:1, and 38:7.*

We know, of course, that the flood narrative begins immediately after this in **Genesis 6:5**. While the judgment of the flood was occasioned by the wickedness of men (**6:5-7, 11-12**), it may be that the unholy angels are called out on account of their contribution to the exceeding wickedness of the days (**6:5**); on account of their desire and attempt to infect; to subvert the race and thus to draw men and women away from God (see Boice on Genesis). **Note:** see also Hebrews 13:2 and Genesis 19:1.

Now Peter supplies another encouragement by relating Christian baptism to the salvation of Noah and his family from the judgment of the flood. I want to read these verses with annotations that may help to clarify them.

1 Peter 3:20b-21. *In which (ark) a few, that is, eight persons (lit. souls; Noah, his wife, their three sons, and their wives), were brought safely through the water (lit. saved through water). ²¹ And corresponding to (antitype; Greek, antitypos) that (water of the flood), baptism now saves you through the resurrection of Jesus Christ -- not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal (pledge or engagement) to God for a good conscience.*

Peter is relating Noah and the flood as a means of deliverance to Christian baptism as a means of salvation. Indeed, he says *baptism now saves you*. Those words are enough to make a good card-carrying Protestant a little uneasy for fear of finding in them a basis for the doctrine of baptismal regeneration - the experience of receiving the Spirit and being born again at the moment of baptism with water regardless of the repentance and faith of the person baptized (see Marshall, p. 130, note). In what sense does baptism save? Peter is not saying that the outward rite conveys spiritual salvation, or that the water possesses some spiritual power, or that anybody who is baptized is saved. According to **verse 21**, in Peter's thinking, *baptism saves ... through the resurrection of Jesus Christ*.

Once again there is an internal clue that helps us discover what Peter has in mind. In **verse 18** he says Christ *brings us to God*. There's the clue. Just as Noah and his family were brought safely through the flood waters so we are brought safely by Christ to God. Deliverance is in view in both. Again look at **verse 18**. The means by which our deliverance is effected are Christ's *having been put to*

death in the flesh (His crucifixion) and Christ's *having been made alive* (His resurrection). We as Reformed people know that the water of baptism symbolizes our union with Christ. Indeed, so strong is the link between the sign (baptism) and the reality of what it represents (deliverance; salvation) that Peter can say with confidence *baptism now saves you*.

So we are delivered; we are saved as we are united to Jesus Christ in His resurrection and this is what is symbolized in baptism. So in summary, Peter has presented Christ as an example of suffering for doing good, to show how His death brings us to God, to stress the fact that though Christ died He was brought to life (as we shall be), to emphasize how Christ proclaimed His triumph to the spirits who corrupted the people of Noah's time, and to stress that Christ, now enthroned alongside God, is superior to all supernatural powers. Consequently, we can confidently stand up to hostility and bear a courageous witness knowing that we will be vindicated just as Christ was (from Marshall, p. 128).