

“The Spirits In Prison”

Introduction. First Peter 3:18-22 contains some of the most difficult exegetical problems in the New Testament. The section prior to this (1 Peter 3:13-17) deals with the matter of suffering and the appropriate response of a Christian. Peter told them to live as they should and understand that suffering can be a blessing. In whatever situation they find themselves in, they are to be courageous and confident toward God. The section under consideration is used to remind Christians that Christ also suffered but triumphed.

But what does the reference to Jesus preaching to “the spirits in prison” mean? Most commentators have difficulty with this passage much like they have difficulty with vs. 21. But a careful examination of the context can help us to clearly see the apostle’s intent.

I. **Possible Interpretations**

- A. The first interpretation states that Christ went down to the realm of the dead and preached to Noah’s contemporaries during the interval between His crucifixion and resurrection. His message has been interpreted as an offer of a second chance for salvation to the spirits. This message has also been interpreted as the announcement of their condemnation or as the announcement of good tidings to those already saved.
- B. The second interpretation sees Christ as proclaiming to the fallen angels His victory on the cross and His triumph over them (Colossians 2:14-15). This supposed victorious proclamation took place perhaps during the three days in a literal descent into Hades, but others also understand it as occurring during His exaltation.
- C. The third interpretation connects 1 Peter 3:18-19 with Genesis 6:1-4, claiming that it refers to angels marrying women. That is, Christ preached to their offspring.
- D. The fourth interpretation views the preexistent Christ as preaching in the time of Noah to Noah’s sinful generation. This is the interpretation that will be developed in the rest of this material.

II. **A Consideration Of The Context**

- A. The verb translated “preached” in the KJV is not the Greek *euangelizomai* (“to preach or tell the good news”), which would certainly have meant that after His crucifixion Christ really did preach salvation to lost souls in Hades; but rather it is *ekeryxen*, from *kerysso* (“proclaim a message,” from a king or potentate). All

that vs. 19 actually says is that Christ made a proclamation to the souls who are now imprisoned in Sheol.

- B. The contents of that proclamation are not made clear, but there are just two possibilities: (1) the proclamation made by the crucified Christ in Hades to all the souls of the dead may have been to the effect that the price had now been paid for sin, and all those who died in the faith were to get ready for their departure to heaven; or (2) the proclamation may refer to that solemn, urgent warning Noah made to his own generation, that they should take refuge in the ark of safety before the Flood would destroy the human race.
1. Based upon a consideration of the context, the second possibility is the proclamation intended here by Peter, since the only audience mentioned is the generation of Noah, which is now imprisoned in Hades, awaiting the final judgment. This verse means, then, that Christ through the Holy Spirit solemnly warned Noah's contemporaries by the mouth of Noah himself (described in 2 Peter 2:5 as "a preacher [or 'herald'] of righteousness").
 2. It is interesting to note that "preacher" in this verse is *keryka*, the same root as the *ekeryxen* referred to above in connection with 1 Peter 3:19.
- C. Therefore, it is evident that the passage under discussion assures us that even back in Noah's day, the Son of God was concerned with the salvation of sinners.
1. However, the Lord could not have preached to those individuals in person. Furthermore, Peter's reference to His going to the men in Noah's day does not require this to be done in person. The presence of Christ with His disciples was to be fulfilled in the Holy Spirit (John 14:16-18, 26; 15:25-26; 16:7-16).
 2. While the Lord was in the spiritual realm before His coming into the world in the flesh (John 1:14), He had gone and preached to the spirits in prison who were disembodied persons at the time of Peter's writing.
- D. Thus the entire transaction whereby Noah's family was rescued through the ark was an event that foreshadowed the gracious provision of God through the death of Jesus. In one sense, the Lord's death on the cross was the sole instrument of deliverance from the flood of divine judgment on guilty mankind. In both cases only those who take refuge in God's salvation can be rescued from destruction.
- E. This relationship of type-antitype is then spelled out quite explicitly by the apostle in 1 Peter 3:21. Baptism is not merely an outward

cleansing such as taking a bath, but is an act wherein one seeks to obtain a clear conscience before God. The ASV renders the phrase "*the answer of a good conscience toward God*" as "*the interrogation of a good conscience toward God*" and adds a footnote which says, "Or, inquiry or appeal." The NASV says, "*An appeal to God for a good conscience.*" Therefore, in the act of baptism, one makes an inquiry or appeal to God for a good conscience. In baptism, one receives the answer from God as his sins are remitted.

- F. In view of the focus on the generation of Noah as corresponding to the lost world of Peter's day, the proclamation referred to in vs. 19 took place, not when Christ descended into Hades after His death on the cross, but by the Spirit who spoke through the mouth of Noah during the years while the ark was under construction (vs. 20). Therefore vs. 19 holds out no hope whatever for a "second chance" for those who reject Christ during their lifetime on earth.

Conclusion. Christ suffered at the hands of men without cause. He overcame His persecutions and now is seated at the right hand of God. Therefore, His example ought to encourage us as we endure trials. While men may be able to persecute us now, if we will be obedient to and serve the same God who exalted His Son Christ, then we have the assurance that He will exalt us as well.