

1. What did the text mean to the biblical audience? Structure diagram 1 Peter 3:18-22

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,
¹⁹ in which He went and proclaimed to the **spirits in prison**,
²⁰ 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.

²¹ Baptism, which corresponds to this,
now saves you,
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,
²² who has gone into heaven
and is at the right hand of God,
with angels,
authorities,
and powers
having been subjected to him.

Truths From Cross References:

Difficult passage alert! 1 Peter 3:18–22 Ties together Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension with the hope of believers who suffer. The main idea is that Christ's victory over sin and death secures our salvation and gives us boldness to endure suffering while living faithfully.

In biblical interpretation, a type (shadow) is an earlier person, event, or thing that foreshadows a later, fuller reality, and the antitype is that later fulfillment or counterpart

Context is King

- Historically, Peter wrote to a group of elect exiles dispersed throughout Asia (1:1).
- These believers were facing immense persecution in the foreign lands where they lived.
- Peter reminds the church of their identity in Christ (1 Peter 1-2) and then calls them to suffer for righteousness's sake and follow the example of their Savior (1 Peter 3-5).
- 1 Peter 3:18-22 follows Peter's call to the exiles to "suffer well" for Christ. Afterwards, Peter gives them the perfect example of suffering well: Jesus on the cross (v. 18a). He then reminds them that victory and glory will eventually follow their suffering because Jesus triumphed over death and proclaimed victory over all powers and dominions.
- This context helps us see why Peter mentions Jesus' proclamation to the spirits in prison. **He wanted to encourage the Christians that since Christ has proclaimed victory over the evil forces in prison, they, too, have this same victory over their persecutors.**
- In the middle of Christ's story, Peter gives Noah as another example of a righteous sufferer whom God exalted in due time. In contrast to those in Noah's generation who had disobeyed, Noah and those with him — they numbered eight in all — "were saved through water" (3:20). Peter then draws out a typological relationship between the flood and baptism: the flood is the type and baptism the antitype, the latter of which "now saves you" (3:21).
- Just as Noah and his family were delivered **by means of the ark** "through water," so Christians are delivered **by means of Christ** through baptism. In this sense, since Noah's salvation *typifies* ours through Christ, Peter includes it at this point in his letter to help us grasp more clearly our own salvation through Christ and to ground more firmly our hope for future exaltation.
- What do the waters picture? Regarding baptism's typological relationship to the flood, the flood was not the means of salvation, but the *occasion* for salvation through the ark. Baptism certainly represents cleansing from sin, but it also evokes salvation through judgment. In the ancient context, large bodies of water and floodwaters were foreboding and dangerous because they were uncontrollable elements in nature that often-brought destruction. Peter's link between baptism and the flood is meant to draw out the link between baptism and judgment.
- **The flood was God's judgment on humanity for sin, and Noah and his family were saved because they were in the ark.** While in some sense Noah's salvation included his deliverance from the corruption of those around him, at a more fundamental level he was delivered from the floodwaters of death by means of the ark. In this sense, the floodwaters in themselves worked judgment, whereas the ark worked salvation for Noah and his family during judgment.
- Like the flood, the waters of baptism in themselves evoke judgment; they are not the means of salvation per se, but they signify the *occasion* in which God worked salvation for his people through Christ. Further, **just as the ark was the formal means of salvation for Noah and his family, believers are saved "through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (verse 21).** The mode of immersion poignantly portrays such salvation through judgment, for immersion evokes both the overwhelming floodwaters of judgment (as the person is submerged) and the salvation from judgment the baptized receives through Christ (as the person emerges).
- This observation about the typological relationship between the flood and baptism suggests that Peter did not conceive of baptism as effectual in itself. According to the typology, baptism is not a mechanism by which the baptismal waters effect what they signify.

Rather, **the typology points to Christ, who like the ark saves us in the midst of God's judgment through His death and resurrection on our behalf.** Baptism signifies our union to Christ in His death and resurrection (Romans 6:3-4).

- The baptismal waters do not convey saving grace in themselves, for baptism, in expressing the faith of the baptized, unavoidably contains a subjective element. Baptism is not the "removal of dirt from the body but . . . an appeal to God for a good conscience" (1 Peter 3:21b). **The contrast between the "body" and the "conscience" points to an outward versus inward reality.**
- Peter wants us to see that the significance of baptism is not the outward washing of water but that which is inward. Peter's point isn't to minimize water baptism. Rather, the water is an outward reality that corresponds to a greater inward reality. The inward reality is "a good conscience," which refers to a conscience unburdened by guilt and an awareness of sins forgiven and a righteous standing before God. Since Peter identifies baptism as an "appeal" or a "request" for a good conscience, baptism is the act through which the individual requests forgiveness and cleansing from a guilty conscience, a request made in the presence of God and God's people.
- **Since God saved them from judgment through the ark as they suffered, God will also save Peter's readers who suffer unjustly.**
- In context, we see that Peter cannot be teaching baptismal regeneration because the Scriptures teach that salvation is by grace through faith. (Genesis 17:5; Romans 4:1-8; Ephesians 2:8-10; Galatians 2:14-22).

Keep the Main Thing the Main Thing

- One mistake we can make when teaching difficult passages is overemphasizing the gray areas and minimizing the clear points the author wants to communicate. We need to understand the main point the author is trying to convey. This will also help us see why he may be making a point that, on the surface, seems unclear.

The "spirits in prison" – Most likely these are fallen angels that are mentioned as the "sons of God" in Genesis 6:1-4, who cohabitated with the daughters of men and brought about God's judgment in the flood. This interpretation also fits into why Peter mentions Noah in the next few verses. Most likely the "spirits" are not humans because "sons of God" refer to fallen angels in other New Testament passages (2 Peter 2:4-5; Jude 6-7). This is the case for two reasons. First, there is only one reference to the use of "spirits" that relates to humans in the New Testament (Hebrews 12:18-24). All other instances refer to evil spiritual beings. Second, the Greek word for prison (*phylake*) never refers to the place of the human dead, but to the location of Satan and his demons (Revelation 18:1-2; 20:7; 2 Peter 2:4).

When did Jesus make this proclamation to the spirits in prison? Most likely this event occurred during His ascension into heaven, not during the time of His death and resurrection. The verb phrase in Greek for "He went" (*poreumai*) in verse 19 is also used in verse 3:22 to describe Jesus' going into heaven. If Peter wanted to describe Jesus' descent into hell, he would have most likely used the more common Greek word (*katabaino*) that describes Jesus' descent in other passages (Romans 10:7; Ephesians 4:9-10).

For your encouragement:

- Christ suffered “once for sins,” so your suffering is not meaningless; Jesus has gone before you and dealt with sin decisively.
- He was “put to death in the flesh but made alive,” which points to victory after apparent defeat, a powerful hope for believers facing hardship.
- 3:21–22 show that baptism points to belonging to Christ and to His authority over all powers, so believers are not abandoned or vulnerable to ultimate defeat.
- The Noah imagery says that just as a few were safely carried through judgment, God will preserve His people through present trials.
- The heart of the passage is that Jesus is already triumphant, and the powers opposed to God are subject to him. That means Christian suffering is temporary, Christ’s victory is certain, and faithfulness now will end in vindication with him.
- Peter is telling believers: “You may be pressured, mocked, or hurt, but Jesus has already passed through suffering and come out victorious.” That makes this passage a strong source of courage, endurance, and hope.
- When you are mocked, persecuted, or misunderstood for doing good, remember that Christ also suffered unjustly, died, was vindicated, and now rules over all powers.
- Your suffering is not meaningless; it is used by God to refine your faith and bear witness to his coming judgment and salvation.
- View your baptism as a once-for-all pledge to God that you are living with a “clear conscience” oriented toward Christ.

- How does Jesus’ suffering help you endure unfair treatment without losing heart?
- What does it mean that Christ suffered “once for sins” for your daily confidence and peace?
- How does Christ’s resurrection strengthen your hope when obedience is costly?
- What does verse 22 teach you about Jesus’ authority over every power and fear?
- How should the reality that Jesus reigns change the way you handle pressure, opposition, or uncertainty?
- What does Noah’s example teach you about obedience when you are in the minority?
- How does baptism remind you of God’s saving work and your new identity in Christ?