

JESUS AND NOAH

1 Peter 3:18-22 *¹⁸ For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, so that He might bring you 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 Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal of a good conscience to God—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 Peter wrote this portion of his letter, he surely had no idea how much interpretive difficulty it would cause—this pericope is classified as one of the most difficult portions of scripture to understand and apply. Of course, we will not be able to solve all the theological problems this passage presents, but we want to get the practical help that Peter presented to encourage us in difficult days.

1. THE MINISTRY OF CHRIST (1 Peter 3:18-22) These verses are parallel to what Peter wrote in chapter 2, verse 21-25, where Peter presented Jesus as the perfect example of one who suffered unjustly, and yet perfectly obeyed His heavenly Father.

The death of Jesus (v. 18) In verse 17, Peter wrote about suffering for well-doing rather than for doing evil, and he used the example of Jesus. Jesus was the “*Just One*” (Acts 3:14). Yet He was treated unjustly and chose to die for the unjust that He might bring them to God! He died only once, as a substitute (1 Peter 2:24; Hebrews 9:24-28). In other words, **Jesus suffered for who He was (Incarnate God) and for what He did (the will of the Father)**—NOT because He was a sinner—Jesus was sinless (1 Peter 2:22).

In His death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus provided the means whereby the unrighteous, the unjust, might be reconciled to God. Because of His sacrifice on the cross, we now can have an open access to Almighty God (cf. Ephesians 2:18; 3:12). In fact, we can come boldly to God’s throne (cf. Hebrews 10:19ff)! We also can receive His amazing grace to supply our every need (Romans 5:2). When Jesus died, the ripping of the Temple veil from top to bottom symbolized the new and open way to God the Father through Jesus Christ, the Son of God (John 14:6)!

The proclamation of Jesus Christ (vv. 19-20). The phrase “*made alive by the Spirit*” does create a problem for our understanding. Capital letters were not used in the writing of koine Greek—so we have no scriptural authority to write “Spirit” rather than “spirit.” Greek scholars indicate that the best English translation of the last portion of v. 18 should probably read, “*Being put to death with reference to the flesh but made alive with reference to the spirit.*” The contrast in the verse is between “*flesh*” and “*spirit*,” as in Matthew 26:41 and Romans 1:3-4, and NOT between Christ’s flesh and the Holy Spirit.

Of course, Jesus had a real *body* (Matthew 26:26), *soul* (John 12:27), and *spirit* (Luke 23:46). **Jesus was not God inhabiting a man, He was the true God-Man.**

When He died, He yielded His Spirit to the Father (Luke 23:46; James 2:26). However, it appears that if Jesus was “*made alive in the spirit*,” which means that at some point, His spirit must have died. Probably, the best explanation is that His spirit died when He was made sin for us and was forsaken by His Heavenly Father (cf. Mark 15:34; Romans 6:23; 2 Corinthians 5:21). The phrase that Peter used, “*made alive in the Spirit*” (3:18) cannot mean “*resurrection*” because that word, by its etymology, always refers to the “*body*.”

So, on the cross, Jesus suffered and died. His body was put to death, and His Spirit died when He was made sin (*i.e., the wages of sin is also death of the spirit* Romans 6:23). However, at some point His Spirit was revived (“*made alive*”), and He yielded it to God the Father.

Then, according to Peter, between His death and His resurrection, Jesus made a special proclamation “*to the spirits in prison.*” The questions are: “*Who were these spirits?*” “*What did Jesus proclaim?*”

Some contend Jesus visited the spirits of unredeemed sinners in hell and proclaimed the good news to them. However, in 1 Peter 3:20, Peter refers to people as *souls* (*psuchē, ψυχή*), not *spirits* (*pneuma, πνεῦμα*). In the New Testament, the word, “*spirits*” is normally used to describe angels or demons, not human beings—and the reference to “*angels, authorities and powers*” in 1 Peter 3:22 seems to support that interpretation.

Nowhere in the Bible does it say that Jesus visited *hell*—In Acts 2:31, Luke wrote that Jesus went to “*hades*,” but *hades* is NOT hell. The word, *hades*, refers to the realm of the dead who lived and died before the New Covenant was inaugurated. It was a temporary place where the dead under the Old Covenant awaited the *resurrection* (cf. Revelation 20:11-15). *Hades* was a temporary place, whereas *hell* is

the permanent and final place of judgment for those who die without a personal faith in Jesus. When born-again believers die, we go to neither place—we go to *heaven* to be with Jesus forever (Philippians 1:20-24).

Jesus yielded His spirit to the Father, died, and at some point, between his death and resurrection, He visited the realm of the dead, where He delivered a message to *spirit beings* (probably fallen angels (cf. Jude 6) who were somehow related to the period before the flood (see 1 Peter 3:20).

The word, “*preached*” simply means to “*announce as a herald, to proclaim.*” It is not the word that means “to preach the gospel” that Peter uses in 1 Peter 1:12 and 4:6). Unfortunately, Peter did not tell us what Jesus proclaimed to these imprisoned spirits, but it could not have been a message of salvation since “*angels*” cannot be saved (cf. Hebrews 2:16). Most likely, it was a declaration of victory over Satan and his hosts (see Colossians 2:15; 1 Peter 3:22).

Exactly how these *spirits* were related to the pre-flood era is not explained. Some believe that the “*sons of God*” named in Genesis 6:1-4 were fallen angels who cohabited with women and produced the giants of old. This Interpretation creates other problems. Indeed, the world before the flood was very wicked and no doubt these spirits had much to do with that wickedness (cf. Genesis 6:5-13; Romans 1:18ff).

The resurrection of Jesus (v. 21). Since *death* comes when the spirit leaves the body (James 2:26), then *resurrection* must involve the *spirit* returning to the body (Luke 8:55). God the Father raised Jesus from the dead (Romans 6:4, 8:11), but Jesus the Son also had authority to raise Himself (John 10:17-18). It was a great miracle! It is because of His resurrection that we believers have the “*living hope*” (1 Peter 1:3-4).

Consider the importance of Jesus’ resurrection—it demonstrates that:

- Jesus is God (Romans 1:4).
- The work of salvation is completed and accepted by God the Father (Romans 4:25).
- Death has been conquered (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Revelation 1:17-18).
- The gospel message is authentic because a dead Savior cannot save anybody (1 Corinthians 15:1-4).
- The risen Christ can give us the power to live victoriously (Galatians 2:20).

The ascension of Jesus (v. 22). Forty days after His resurrection, Jesus ascended to heaven to take His seat at the right hand of the Father, the place of His exaltation (Acts

2:34-36; Philippians 2:5-11; Hebrews 12:1-3)! Believers are seated with Him in the heavenlies (Ephesians 2:4-6), and through Him, we can “*reign in life*” (Romans 5:17). From heaven, Jesus is ministering to His church as High Priest (Hebrews 4:14-16; 7:25) and Advocate (1 John 1:9-2:2). He is preparing a place for His people (John 14:1-6) and will one day return to receive us to Himself.

However, Peter’s primary emphasis was Christ’s complete victory over all “*angels and authorities and powers*” (3:22), referring to the evil hosts of Satan (Ephesians 6:10-12; Colossians 2:15). Since Jesus is Lord, the unfallen angels were and forever will be subject to the Lord Jesus. As Christians, we do not fight for victory; we fight from victory—the mighty victory that Jesus won for us in His death, resurrection, ascension, and exaltation!

2. THE MINISTRY OF NOAH

Among Jews and Christians, Noah has always been held in high regard. In Ezekiel 14:19-29, he is linked with both Daniel and Job, two great patriarchs of faith. Jesus referred to Noah in His prophetic sermons (Matthew 24:37-39; Luke 17:26-27). Peter not only mentioned him in this letter, but he also mentioned Noah in his second letter (2 Peter 2:5). Of course, Noah is included with the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11:7.

In his second letter Peter referred to Noah as a “*preacher of righteousness*” (2 Peter 2:5) when the world had turned away from their Creator. Noah walked with the Lord and preached God’s truth for 120 years while the world laughed at him, mocked him, and opposed him. The early church knew that Jesus had promised the world would become like the “*days of Noah*” before His return (Matthew 24:37-39), and they were expecting His imminent return (2 Peter 3:1-3). Of course, **blatant sinfulness and increasing opposition always cause Christians to remember the Lord’s words about His return.**

Noah was indeed a man of faith who stayed faithful even when his labor seemed futile. In response to God’s word, Noah labored for years anticipating that the Ark would be useful, even when that size flood made no sense. Where would the water come from since there is no biblical evidence that it had ever rained before Noah’s flood. The people considered Noah to be less than sane for his obedience to what he believed God had told him to do. He persisted regardless of their laughter, their mocking, and their opposition. The reminder about Noah’s faithfulness without any evidence that what he was doing was necessary would certainly be an encouragement to Peter’s readers who saw little cultural or societal impact from their faithfulness.

However, Peter saw another connection to Noah: **Peter saw the flood as a picture of believer's baptism**—the Lord's death, burial, and resurrection. Baptism declares the believer's clean break with the past, which could mean separation from the believer's family, friends, and work.

The early church saw in the ark a picture of salvation. In that regard, the flood pictures death, burial, and resurrection. The water buried the earth in judgment, but the water also lifted Noah and his family to safety. Noah and his family were saved by faith since they believed God and entered the ark of safety. Similarly, sinners are saved by faith when they trust Jesus and are born again.

When Peter wrote that Noah and his family were "*saved by water.*" He was careful to explain that this illustration does not imply salvation by baptism. Baptism, itself, is also a "*figure,*" a symbol, of how we are saved which is made possible through the resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 3:21). Water cannot remove the guilt or stains of sin—only the blood of Jesus can wash away our sins (1 John 1:7-2:2).

However, baptism does save us from one thing: *a bad conscience*! Earlier, Peter had told his readers that a *good conscience* was important to a successful witness (1 Peter 3:16). A significant part of a "*good conscience*" is faithfulness in our commitment to Jesus which begins and is expressed in baptism.

Since baptism is the first act of obedience for believers, it is a physical pledge through which believers commit themselves to break with their past (*dead to sin*) and will serve God (*raised to walk in the new life*). Of course, if they held reservations about their commitment or deliberately lied, they would not have a *good conscience* if, under pressure or persecution, they denied the Lord—something Peter had personally experienced (cf. Matthew 26:69ff). In other words, baptism was not merely the celebration of saving faith, it was also a public, personal commitment to live out that faith!

3. THE MINISTRY OF CHRISTIANS TODAY

Peter was sharing lessons with his readers that are still very relevant!

1) **Baptism is important!** It identifies us with Jesus and demonstrates that we have forsaken the old life, and we will, by His strength, live a new life! It is our pledge to God that by His power we will obey Him! If we are to have a *good conscience*, we must do what our baptism states...*raised to walk in new life*!

2) **Christians must expect opposition.** After all, Jesus the God-Man lived a perfect life, and yet was crucified like a terrible criminal. If the sinless One was treated cruelly,

why would we sinners expect to escape suffering in this world? Of course, we must be careful that our suffering comes from well-doing, for righteousness' sake, and not because our attitudes and actions deserve such suffering.

3) **Christians must serve God in faithfulness without regard for apparent results.**

Noah was only successful in saving seven people; Jesus was crucified and all His disciples abandoned Him at His arrest. We serve in obedience—not to achieve certain results. The Lord causes all things to work together for His glory—even faithful failures! **SUCCESS AS DISCIPLES IS MEASURED IN FAITHFULNESS!**

4) **Christians can be encouraged because we share in Christ's victory!** This is the message of baptism! In our death to self and sin, the indwelling Holy Spirit, through both natural and supernatural opposition, empowers the believer to live eternally (John 3:16) and abundantly (John 10:10). Our enemies have already been defeated by the power of Our Lord Jesus Christ, who has all authority in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18).

5) **Jesus is the only Savior, and the lost world needs to hear the gospel.** Some people try to use this complex passage of scripture to prove another chance for salvation after death. The interpretation applies to "*spirits in prison*," indicating angelic beings, and not the souls of the dead. Hebrews 9:27 makes it clear that physical death ends the opportunity for salvation. Because millions are dying daily who have never heard a credible witness of the gospel, the church must prioritize evangelism and missions!