

A BAPTIZED PEOPLE
1 Peter 3:18b-22
February 8, 2009 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

In 2 Peter 3:13-16 Peter wrote concerning Paul's writings,

¹³ But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. ¹⁴ Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless, ¹⁵ and regard the patience of our Lord *as* salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, ¹⁶ as also in all *his* letters, speaking in them of these things, *in which are some things hard to understand*, which the untaught and unstable distort, as *they do* also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction.

Peter, inspired by the Holy Spirit when he wrote this, admitted that some of Paul's words, also inspired by the Holy Spirit, are difficult to understand or comprehend or interpret. I, along with many, would say the same of Peter's words in our text this morning, particularly v. 19. I labored greatly this week in my studies to present these things pastorally. As I mentioned to some of you, it would be easier to simply stand and give a lecture and leave it at that. However, that is not good preaching. However, given the difficulty with these verses, I must take the time to set forth some of the different views, some viable and others errant.

Given the difficulties, however, I do believe the tension is lessened somewhat when we consider the context of verses 18-22.

Context (*persecution*): 1 Peter 1:18a then 1:22 – the triumph of Christ's suffering; THEN
1 Peter 1:17 then 4:1 – overall theme of suffering for righteousness with Christ as the supreme example.

So what Peter gives here is meant to be *an encouragement to those who were suffering for the sake of the gospel*.

I. The difficulty of “the spirits in prison” (3:18b-20a)

Martin Luther proclaimed of this verse, “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 what Peter means.”¹ Luther's haziness concerning this verse is understood when we consider that, according to Edmund Hiebert on v. 19, “Each of the nine words in the original has been differently understood.”² Perhaps this is why Spurgeon never preached on these verses, or at least not in his Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit. Wayne Grudem, whose view is on this verse is popular today, gives nine pages in his *Systematic Theology* and an appendix of thirty-six pages, nearly 20 percent, in his commentary on *1 Peter*.³

So how are we to attack this text this morning? Well, I will agree with Luther: I cannot be certain what Peter means in these verses. This means that there will be those who agree to disagree with my interpretation. I will tell you that Steve and I probably disagree in part, as do

¹ Martin Luther, *Commentary on Peter & Jude*, 166.

² D. Edmund Hiebert, *1 Peter*, 240.

³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 586-594; *TNTC: 1 Peter*, 203-239.

Ligon Duncan and his associate Derek Thomas, both gifted expositors.⁴ In looking at this, I will follow Wayne Grudem's line of questioning on this text which serves as a good way to approach it, though I come to a different conclusion. In looking at this, Grudem asks three questions⁵:

1. **When did Christ preach?**
2. **Who are the spirits in prison?**
3. **What did Christ preach?**

1. **When did Christ preach?**

The answer to this question comes from how one interprets the end of v. 18, **“having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.”** Given the context, there are two schools of thought. One view suggests that when Noah was building the ark, Christ **“in the spirit”** preached through Noah to unbelievers who were then on the earth but are now **“spirits in prison.”** Christ was not personally present but spoke by means of the Spirit of Christ who Peter earlier in the letter spoke of inhabiting the prophets in 1:10-11. This view then looks to Peter's reference of this topic in 2 Peter 2:4-5, “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; and did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, *a preacher of righteousness*, with seven others, when He brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly.” Taking these together, the conclusion is that Christ was that preacher of righteousness who preached through Noah in his day. This was the view of Augustine and that which Grudem follows in his work.

The other view is that this preaching took place sometime after Christ died, whether it be sometime between His death and resurrection, between His resurrection and His ascension, or after His ascension. Regardless, His preaching was sometime chronologically after His death. While the other view has some merit, it seems that this view is more reasonable, though it has many facets that we will see are not viable in a moment. In this verse, Peter sets up a contrast between **“put to death in the flesh”** and **“made alive in the spirit.”** **“Put to death in the flesh”** emphasizes the brutality at Calvary. Jesus did not die of natural causes, but His death was an unjust death at the hands of unrighteous men. On this there is no disagreement amongst any scholar of any worth. They all agree that this is a clear reference to the Cross. This same Peter proclaimed in Acts 2:23, “This man... you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put *Him* to death.” He went on in v. 24, “But God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power.” This appears to be the same message he now gives in 1 Peter. Even Grudem admits that **“made alive in the spirit”** “refers specifically to Christ's resurrection, because ‘made alive’ is the opposite of ‘put to death’ in the previous phrase.” He goes on to say, however, that when Christ went and preached does not necessarily mean in His resurrected body, but to the spiritual realm or the realm of the Spirit's activity.⁶

However, this seems to go against what Peter here suggests. **“In which” (v. 19)** refers either to simply **“in the spirit”** as Grudem suggests, or to the entire phrase **“but made alive in the spirit”** or perhaps “by the Spirit” (NIV) and therefore at the very least the time between His death and resurrection, but more specifically, as Grudem admits, to His resurrected body itself. So one view suggests then that the pre-incarnate Christ went in the spirit and preached through

⁴ http://www.fpcjackson.org/resources/sermons/Derek%27s_SERMONS/1%20Peter/04b1peter.htm, accessed 02/07/2009.

⁵ Grudem, *1 Peter*, 157-158, 203. I have changed the order of the questions, moving #3 to #1.

⁶ Grudem, *1 Peter*, 226-227.

Noah in his day, the other that this refers to some time after Christ's death and more particularly, I believe, to His resurrected body.

The strength of this view I think is in the point that we saw last week, that while the reconciliation of sinful man to a holy God is grounded in Christ's work of atonement, in His dying "for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God," the effectual operation of this towards eternal life required the resurrection of Christ. This is what the apostle Paul suggests in Romans 4:25 and 5:10, "*He* who was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification" and "For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life." This is what I believe Peter suggests in this text. And further, Peter emphasizes that "**He went and made proclamation.**" If Christ was simply a disembodied spirit, why the stress on "**He went**"? And Peter does not say that Christ went and made proclamation *through Noah*, but that *He* went and proclaimed. While Noah is called the preacher of righteousness in 2 Peter 2, I believe that it was Noah that preached in His day, and yes, in and according to the Spirit of Christ, just as any who have proclaimed His Word. But the context here I think refers to a time after being "**made alive in the spirit,**" Christ's resurrection.

2. Who are the spirits in prison?

The question is, "to whom did Christ preach?" coupled with "where or what is the prison?" As we noted, Augustine's view as with Grudem is that when Noah was building the ark, Christ "**in the spirit**" was in Noah preaching through him to unbelievers who are now in prison, or in hell. All other views have Christ, some time after His death, preaching either to human spirits or to fallen angels. One view is that this refers to men alive after Pentecost who are in a natural prison-house of bondage to sin and Satan to whom the gospel was preached by Christ through the apostles. This was a popular view in the early church and appears to be the view of Martin Luther, who saw absolutely no reason to see a descent of Christ into hell from this passage. This view, however, does not adequately account for the phrase in v. 20, "**who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark.**" Peter singles out this group in the time of Noah, whoever or whatever they are. So were these "**spirits**" angels or humans spirits?

The evidence for angels is impressive. Tom Schreiner suggests, "The word 'spirits' fits much more plausibly with a reference to angels than to human beings, for 'spirits' in the plural almost without exception in the New Testament refers to angels... Further, though, the word 'prison' is often used to denote the place where human beings are held on earth, but it is never used to denote the place of punishment for human beings after death. The term is used in Rev. 20:7, however, for Satan's confinement for one thousand years. That evil angels are imprisoned is clearly taught in Jewish tradition."⁷

Another strength of this seen is when we look at it in context with vv. 21-22, where Peter again refers to the resurrection of Christ along with His exaltation to the right hand of God. There seems to be a relation between "**spirits**" in v. 19 and "**angels and authorities and powers**" in v. 22. In both cases, evil angels are in view, who Christ proclaims victory over in v. 19 as the crucified and risen Lord, and in v. 22 as they are subjected to Him. If we keep to Peter's chronology, it appears that this preaching then was done sometime between the resurrection of Christ in v. 19 and His ascension in v. 22 because Peter says that Jesus ascended *after* "**angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him.**"

⁷ Thomas R. Schreiner, *NAC:1,2 Peter, Jude*, 186-187.

Further, as we noted earlier, Peter returned to this topic in his second letter, referring to the evil angels whose activity was heightened prior to the flood. Jude refers to “angels who did not keep their own domain, but abandoned their proper abode” and are “kept in eternal bonds under darkness for the judgment on that great day” (Jude 6).

Having said that, and I believe the Scriptural evidence is on Schreiner’s side in relation to the New Testament use of the plural “**spirits**,” the end argument I will suggest is not weakened if one interprets “**spirits**” as the imprisoned spirits of evil men. As a matter of fact, Derek Thomas seems to have both in mind, referring to the entire demonic spiritual realm which would be inhabited by both fallen angels and the disembodied spirits of fallen man.⁸ While Peter does seem to make a distinction between “**spirits**” in v. 19 and “**persons**” in v. 20, we must also admit that the emphasis is on the salvation of persons, not angels, which cannot be saved. So there is some credence for all three views, human spirits, angels, or both, though I lean toward fallen angels. With this in mind, *what* Christ preached then becomes the most crucial part of interpretation.

3. What did Christ preach?

This is where errant theology has run amok. How one interprets the timing of Christ’s preaching, whether it be pre-incarnate or after his death, and to whom He preached, whether it be men, angels, or both, is important, the *content* of His message then becomes very important. The word “**made proclamation**” or “preached” is often taken in reference to the proclamation of the gospel, particularly the need for repentance. Here I think it will help to summarize the different views of our text as it relates to Grudem’s three questions. Then we can toss out what we know is false and press on with what could be.⁹

View 1: After Christ died, he went and preached repentance to *people in hell*, offering them a second chance of salvation. If 1 Peter 3:19 was the only verse of Scripture we had, then this would be a viable option. However, here we see the danger of building a theology on one verse! In no way can we look even at Peter’s letter alone and see where a second chance theology that teaches that after one has died and gone to hell they can still be saved from the wrath of God. But when we look at all of Scripture, we must call this view heretical. This does not allow for a second chance theology.

View 2: 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. As with the first view, there is no biblical warrant for this. As a matter of fact, I see no single verse that could even be interpreted as such. And even if there were, we have the testimony historically in Genesis and here in 1 Peter that only eight persons were saved. The rest died in their sins and remain imprisoned to this very day with no hope of salvation. There is no Purgatory in the sense that any person who occupies it or is imprisoned can be released.

View 3: This would be Augustine’s view, that when Noah was building the ark, Christ ‘in spirit’ was in Noah preaching repentance and righteousness through him to *unbelievers who were then on earth* but are now ‘spirits in prison’ or people in hell. The pre-incarnate Christ preached repentance through Noah to those unbelievers who were then alive but then destroyed by the flood. We do know that Noah preached righteousness, and he had 120 years to do so!

⁸ http://www.fpcjackson.org/resources/sermons/Derek%27s_SERMONS/1%20Peter/04b1peter.htm, accessed 02/07/2009.

⁹ Views found in Grudem, *1 Peter*, 204. Please note that I have changed order somewhat for flow.

Because they were unrepentant, they are now imprisoned. As we have seen, though this is not my preferred interpretation, it is viable.

View 4: 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. This is different than the prior second chance view in that the proclamation is different. Christ did not preach repentance, but triumph or victory over them and His reign over them in hell. This view can be taken along with the view that the ‘spirits in prison’ are fallen angels. The result is the same – Christ proclaims triumph over evil spirits and reigns over them.

Given these views, the only viable ones are 3 and 4. The main differences have been noted. Here we point out the difference in the proclamation. In the Greek, the word is not the word typically used for proclamation of the gospel, and the word “repentance” is not in the text. The word that Peter used for “**proclamation**” cannot be made to mean gospel preaching. It simply means “to proclaim” or “to make known.” So how one interprets the word determines which of these two views one takes. If this means preaching repentance, then you cannot say that the “**spirits now in prison**” are fallen men or angels because this would lead to either a second chance for men or the belief that angels can be saved. Neither is true. If you believe that Jesus preached triumph or victory, then you cannot hold to the pre-incarnate Spirit of Christ preaching through Noah because victory was not accomplished until He rose again. It really is that simple!

Again, given the context, I believe the most suitable interpretation for those who were in the midst of a suffering and persecution that would only increase, is that Peter gives Christ as an example of righteous suffering as well as one in whom they already had victory for their battle as well. His triumph over evil was their triumph as well.

II. The difficulty of “baptism now saves you” (3:20b-22)

There are those today who look at this as a proof text for baptismal regeneration, the view that water baptism actually washes away sins and saves you. As we look at this, I want to remind us to be careful that we do not say something that Peter did not say. That too would be error. For instance, I have heard those who know that this does not teach baptismal regeneration say, “Peter did not say, ‘baptism saves you’” and then they go on to give their defense. The problem with that is that Peter *did* say in v. 21 “**baptism now saves you.**” So the better approach is not to say that Peter did not say, but to ask, “I what way does baptism now save you?”

Look at v. 20. Introducing the days of Noah, Peter proclaims, “**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 through the water.**” As we look at this, we must ask what purpose the water or the flood served and how were these eight actually saved? The answer is rather clear. The water did not save Noah and his family. The water was a means of God’s judgment. The flood destroyed every living flesh that was not in the ark. It was through the ark that the eight were saved from the waters of God’s judgment. For Peter, this serves as a picture of salvation. I like the way one writer summarized the importance of these words:

Allen Stibbs – “The ark passing safely through the flood provides a figure of God’s method of saving men out inevitable judgment. First, God delayed the day of judgment long enough for an ark to be prepared. Then the souls that went into the ark did not avoid the judgment, rather in the ark they were saved through the very water which drowned others and because of it they thus passed out of the old world into a new world.

When they emerged from the ark, they literally found that old things had passed away and all things had become new.¹⁰

That is a good interpretation of the waters of judgment and the means of God's deliverance, that being the ark. Then in v. 21 Peter gives a key to interpreting this text, "**Corresponding to that.**" Corresponding to what? What he had just said concerning the waters of judgment and the deliverance through the ark. "**Corresponding to that,**" "like that," literally, "as a figure point to," Peter says, "**baptism now saves you.**" The salvation of the eight from the judgment of God's waters through the ark points to, is a picture or type of, *how* baptism saves you.

Allen Stibbs – The figure," he writes, "is fulfilled in Christ. He was prepared of God to come in the fullness of time. The judgment due to sin and sinners was meanwhile delayed. Then the judgment fell on Him as the flood waters upon the ark. And when sinners take refuge in Him, they do not avoid the judgment due to sin, they are saved through its falling on Christ and because of it instead of meeting their own doom they are brought safe in Him to God."¹¹

What saves you? Not water baptism, but immersion into the ark of safety who is Christ. You go through the death and burial and resurrection and the judgment of God falls but it falls on the ark and not on you. What saves you? Not some external ritual or external rite, but a heart longing to be delivered from the crushing burden of sin that plagues your evil conscience and wants to covenant with God to live an obedient life. And it leads you through the judgment out the other side through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That celebrates, that completes the salvation triumph.¹²

This is what our water baptism then symbolizes. It is a picture of an inward reality that happens the moment one comes to faith in Christ. Romans 6:4, "Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life." There, just like the waters of the flood destroyed evil, so our sins, our enemy, are buried with Him. We are dead to sin, and delivered from the judgment of sin through the ark, the risen Christ. It is a picture of being immersed in Him.

Just in case there was still any doubt, Peter says that the ceremony of baptism does not wash away our sin, as a bath removes the dirt from our bodies. It is the work of Christ and His death and resurrection that washes away sin and gives new life. And so when one is baptized, it is a testimony of a "**good conscience,**" a conscience that has been purified by the blood of Christ according to Hebrews 9:14 and that believes and trusts in Christ's merits for them. It is an act of obedience *because* they are saved, not and act of obedience *to be* saved.

Conclusion

Wayne Grudem¹³:

1. We deserve to *die* as a penalty for sin. However, "**Christ also died for sins once for all.**" Christ died as a *sacrifice* for our sins.

¹⁰ Quoted by John MacArthur, <http://www.gty.org/Resources/Sermons/60-38>, accessed 02/06/2009.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 580.

2. We deserve to bear God's wrath against sin. However, Christ's death is called "***the just for the unjust.***" We who were unrighteous receive His righteousness as a *propitiation* for our sins which provides *satisfaction* for God's wrath.

3. We are separated from God by our sins. However, Christ's death was "**so that He might bring us to God.**" The death of Christ makes *reconciliation* possible.

4. We are in bondage to sin and to the kingdom of Satan. However, Christ has triumphed over sin and Satan, "**put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit...through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is at the right hand of God.**" The death and resurrection of Christ provided *freedom* from the bondage and penalty of sin and places the believer in His kingdom.