

I Peter 3:18-22
June 11, 2017

Open with Prayer

DEB:

“made alive in the Spirit” – does not refer to Christ’s resurrection b/c resurrection refers to the body.

“spirits in prison” – In NT, “spirits” refers to angels or demons, not human beings. They were NOT lost sinners in hell.

“Hades vs Hell” – Fact: Nowhere in the Bible do we read that Jesus ever visited hell. We do read that he visited Hades (Acts 2:31); Temporary place for unbelieving dead while they await resurrection; Read Rev 20:11-15 for clear distinction between the two.

“preached” – Definition: To proclaim; to announce as a herald. Peter was not saying that Christ was “preaching the Gospel” message.

HOOK:

Q: Do you believe that people have a second chance at salvation AFTER they die? And what Scriptures come to mind to support your answer? [Let people engage]

There’s no question that it feels good to think that those who turned their back on God throughout their life get a second chance after they die. After all, God is a God of Grace and Mercy, and a “loving God doesn’t want to see any of His children separated from Him for all of eternity. This notion has been pushed as recently as Rob Bell’s book entitled “Love Wins.” He claims that all people will be redeemed in the end. But do they really? The Bible warns us of spiritual counterfeits; teachings that seem pleasing, but betray the truth (2 Cor 11:14, 2 Tim 4:3, 1 John 4:1-6).

Transition: I bet when Peter wrote the verses we’re getting ready to study, he had no idea that centuries later, good and godly interpreters would wrestle with these verses, debate and disagree, and have not always left behind a great deal of spiritual help. Today’s passage “appears” to open the door to the notion that people have a second chance during the afterlife to receive Christ. Peter will reference “spirits in prison,” which some Christians believe reference the spirits of lost sinners in hell, to whom Jesus brought the good news of salvation. But is that what Peter is really saying? I will help define some of the terms to help you look at this passage with as much interpretation integrity as possible. Let’s begin.

BOOK (NIV 1984):

V.18:

- For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit,

V.19:

- through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison

V.20:

- who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water,

V.21:

- and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge (or response) of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ,

V.22:

- who has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

Process Observations/Questions:

Read Wiersbe commentary to help people process this difficult teaching:

The phrase “made alive by the Spirit” (KJV) creates a problem for us. In the Greek manuscripts, there were no capital letters; so we have no authority to write “Spirit” rather than “spirit.” Greek scholars tell us that the end of 1 Peter 3:18 should read: “Being put to death with reference to the flesh, but made alive with reference to the spirit.” The contrast 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.

Our Lord had a real body (Matt. 26:26), soul (John 12:27), and spirit (Luke 23:46). He 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; see James 2:26). However, it seems evident that, if He was “made alive in the spirit,” at some point His spirit must have died. It was probably when He was made sin for us and was forsaken by the Father (Mark 15:34; 2 Cor. 5:21). The phrase “quicken[ed] in [with reference to] the spirit” cannot mean resurrection, because resurrection has to do with *the body*.

So on the cross, our Lord suffered and died. His body was put to death, and His spirit died when He was made sin. But His spirit was made alive and He yielded it to the Father. Then according to Peter, sometime between His death and His resurrection Jesus made a special proclamation to “the spirits in prison.” This raises two questions: Who were these “spirits” that He visited? What did He proclaim to them?

Those who say that these “spirits in prison” were the spirits of lost sinners in hell, to whom Jesus brought the good news of salvation, have some real problems to solve. To begin with, Peter referred to people as “souls” and not “spirits” (1 Peter 3:20). In the New Testament, the word “spirits” is used to describe angels or demons, not human beings; and 1 Peter 3:22 seems to argue for this meaning. Furthermore, nowhere in the Bible are we told that Jesus visited hell. Acts 2:31 states that He went to “hades”, but “hades” is not hell. The word “hades” refers to the realm of the unbelieving dead, a temporary place where they await the resurrection. Read Revelation 20:11–15 in the *New American Standard Bible* or the *New International Version* and you will see the important distinction. Hell is the permanent and final place of judgment for the lost. Hades is the temporary place. When a Christian dies, he goes to neither place, but to heaven to be with Christ (Phil. 1:20–24).

Our Lord yielded His spirit to the Father, died, and at some time between death and resurrection, visited the realm of the dead where He delivered a message to spirit beings (probably fallen angels; see Jude 6) who were somehow related to the period before the Flood.

First Peter 3:20 makes this clear. The word translated “preached” simply means “to announce as a herald, to proclaim.” It is not the word that means “to preach the Gospel” that Peter used in 1 Peter 1:12 and 4:6. Peter did not tell us *what* Jesus proclaimed to these imprisoned spirits, but it could not be a message of redemption since angels cannot be saved (Heb. 2:16). It was probably a declaration of victory over Satan and his hosts (see Col. 2:15; 1 Peter 3:22).

How these spirits were related to the pre-Flood era, Peter did not explain. Some students believe that “the sons of God” named in Genesis 6:1–4 were fallen angels who cohabited with women and produced a race of giants, but I cannot accept this interpretation. The *good* angels who did not fall are called “sons of God,” but not the fallen angels (Job 1:6; 2:1, and note that Satan is distinguished from the “sons of God”). The world before the Flood was unbelievably wicked, and no doubt these spirits had much to do with it (see Gen. 6:5–13; Rom. 1:18ff).

The resurrection of Christ (v. 21). Since death comes when the spirit leaves the body (James 2:26), then resurrection involves the spirit *returning* to the body (Luke 8:55). The Father raised Jesus from the dead (Rom. 6:4; 8:11), but the Son also had authority to raise Himself (John 10:17–18). It was a miracle! It is because of His resurrection that Christians have the “living hope” (1 Peter 1:3–4). We shall see later how the resurrection of Christ relates to the experience of Noah.

We must never minimize the importance of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It declares that He is God (Rom. 1:4), that the work of salvation is completed and accepted by the Father (Rom. 4:25), and that death has been conquered (1 Thes. 4:13–18; Rev. 1:17–18). The Gospel message includes the Resurrection (1 Cor. 15:1–4), for a dead Saviour can save nobody. It is the risen Christ who gives us the power we need on a daily basis for life and service (Gal. 2:20).

The ascension of Christ (v. 22). Forty days after His resurrection, our Lord ascended to heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father, the place of exaltation (Ps. 110:1; Acts 2:34–36; Phil. 2:5–11; Heb. 12:1–3). Believers are seated with Him in the heavenlies (Eph. 2:4–6), and through Him we are able to “reign in life” (Rom. 5:17). He is ministering to the church as High Priest (Heb. 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 come to receive them to Himself.

But the main point Peter wanted to emphasize was Christ’s complete victory over all “angels and authorities and powers” (1 Peter 3:22), referring to the evil hosts of Satan (Eph. 6:10–12; Col. 2:15). The unfallen angels were *always* subject to Him. As Christians, we do not fight *for* victory, but *from* victory—the mighty victory that our Lord Jesus Christ won for us in His death, resurrection, and ascension.

LOOK:

Since Peter did not tell us *what* Jesus proclaimed to these imprisoned spirits, we know it could NOT be a message of redemption since angels cannot be saved (Heb. 2:16). It was probably a declaration of victory over Satan and his hosts (see Col. 2:15; 1 Peter 3:22). But the main point Peter wanted to emphasize was Christ’s complete victory over all “angels and authorities and powers” (1 Peter 3:22), referring to the evil hosts of Satan (Eph. 6:10–12; Col. 2:15). The unfallen angels were *always* subject to Him.

Close in Prayer

Commentaries for Today's Lesson:

Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Vol. 2, pp. 414–420). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

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Raymer, R. M. (1985). 1 Peter. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures (Vol. 2, pp. 848-855). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

3:19–20. **Through whom ... He ... preached to the spirits in prison** has been subject to many interpretations. Some believe Peter here referred to the descent of Christ’s Spirit into hades between His death and resurrection to offer people who lived before the Flood a second chance for salvation. However, this interpretation has no scriptural support.

Others have said this passage refers to Christ’s descent into hell after His crucifixion to proclaim His victory to the imprisoned fallen angels referred to in 2 Peter 2:4–5, equating them with “the sons of God” Moses wrote about (Gen. 6:1–2). Though much commends this view as a possible interpretation, the context seems more likely to be referring to humans rather than angels.

The “spirits” (*pneumasin*, a term usually applied to supernatural beings but also used at least once to refer to human “spirits”; cf. Heb. 12:23) are described in 1 Peter 3:20 as those who were disobedient **when God waited patiently for Noah** to finish building **the ark**. They had rebelled against the message of God during the 120 years the ark was being built. God declared He would not tolerate people’s wickedness forever, but would extend His patience for only 120 more years (Gen. 6:3). Since the entire human race except Noah (Gen. 6:5–9) was evil, God determined to “wipe mankind ... from the face of the earth.” The “spirits” referred to in 1 Peter 3:20 are probably the souls of the evil human race that existed in the days of Noah. Those “spirits” are now “in prison” awaiting the final judgment of God at the end of the Age.

The problem remains as to *when* Christ preached to these “spirits.” Peter’s explanation of the resurrection of Christ (3:18) “by the Spirit” brought to mind that the preincarnate Christ was actually in Noah, ministering through him, by means of the Holy Spirit. Peter (1:11) referred to the “Spirit of Christ” in the Old Testament prophets. Later he described Noah as “a preacher of righteousness” (2 Peter 2:5). The Spirit of Christ preached through Noah to the ungodly humans who, at the time of Peter’s writing, were “spirits in prison” awaiting final judgment.

This interpretation seems to fit the general theme of this section (1 Peter 3:13–22)—keeping a good conscience in unjust persecution. Noah is presented as an example of one who committed himself to a course of action for the sake of a clear conscience before God, though it meant enduring harsh ridicule. Noah did not fear men but obeyed God and proclaimed His message. Noah’s reward for keeping a clear conscience in unjust suffering was the salvation of himself and his family, who **were saved through water**, being brought safely through the Flood.

3:21. **And this** (*ho*, relative pronoun—“water” is the understood antecedent) **water symbolizes baptism** (*baptisma*). Baptism represents a complete break with one’s past life. As the Flood wiped away the old sinful world, so baptism pictures one’s break from his old sinful life and his entrance into new life in Christ. Peter now applied to his readers the principle he set forth in verses 13–17 and illustrated in verses 18–20. He exhorted them to have the courage to commit themselves to a course of action by taking a public stand for Christ through baptism. The act of public baptism would “save” them from the temptation to sacrifice their good consciences in order to avoid persecution. For a first-century Christian, baptism meant he was following through on his commitment to Christ, regardless of the consequences.

Baptism does not save from sin, but from a bad conscience. Peter clearly taught that baptism was not merely a ceremonial act of physical purification, **but** (*alla*, making a strong contrast) **the pledge** (*eperōtēma*, also “appeal”;) **of a good conscience** (*syneidēseōs*; cf. v. 16) **toward God**. Baptism is the symbol of what has already occurred in the heart and life of one who has trusted Christ as Savior (cf. Rom. 6:3–5; Gal. 3:27; Col. 2:12). To make the source of salvation perfectly clear Peter added, **by the resurrection of Jesus Christ** (cf. 1 Peter 1:3).

3:22. Mentioning Christ’s resurrection returned Peter’s thoughts to his original example, so he concluded his digression and completed his first illustration with a reference to Christ’s reward and blessing. Having witnessed Christ’s physical Ascension (cf. Mark 16:19; Luke 24:51; Acts 1:6–11), Peter wrote that Christ **has gone into heaven**. The reward for Christ’s faithfulness is seen in His exaltation over all things. He is enthroned **at God’s right hand** (cf. Ps. 110:1; Heb. 1:13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2), the seat of supreme honor, to rule and reign over all creation (cf. Col. 1:15–16; 2:14–15).

Love Wins: Making a Contradictory Case for Universalism **Article ID: JAF5344 | By: Douglas Groothuis**

Douglas Groothuis, Ph.D., is professor of philosophy at Denver Seminary and the author of many books on apologetics, including *Christian Apologetics* (IVP Academic, 2011).

Love Wins begins by telling a short story that leads Bell to wonder whether Gandhi is in hell. He asserts that traditional ideas of heaven and hell have repulsed many from being Christians. As he writes later in the book, “Telling a story about a God who inflicts unrelenting punishment on people because they didn’t do or say or believe the right things in a brief window of time called

life isn't a very good story" (p. 110). The biblical view of the afterlife, therefore, should be readdressed in the hopes of reaching those who have rejected Christian faith.

This is a noble intention, but intentions are insufficient for virtue. We should be like Paul, who said, "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings" (1 Cor. 9:22–23⁸). Zeal for evangelism should meet two conditions. First, one must realize that many people reject the gospel of Jesus Christ not because they have been presented with a defective version of it, but because they do not want to bow their knee to God. As Jesus said, "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19). The gospel is always offensive to human pride (see 1 Cor. 1:18–2:16). We must understand the bad news that we are sinners before a holy God before we can receive the good news that we can be restored through God's grace in Christ. We should not shy away from the implications of biblical teaching. Second, we should never redefine and so diminish the gospel for the sake of winning a larger audience (see Gal. 1:6–11). Adjusting the gospel to placate human rebellion against God transforms the good news into a compromise with worldliness, something we should earnestly avoid (Rom. 12:1–2; James 1:27; 4:4; 1 John 2:15–17).

Judgment immediately follows death and there are no biblical texts that even suggest otherwise.¹⁵ Consider Jesus' warning to the Pharisees: "If you do not believe that I am he, you will indeed *die in your sins*" (John 8:24, emphasis added; cf. Heb. 9:27).

Consider Jesus' warning to pseudo-Christians, "Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" (Matt. 7:22–23; cf. 8:11–12). Jesus also said, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them" (John 3:36). He also prophesies a day when the dead will be raised and evil-doers will be condemned (John 5:28–29). Many other passages on this theme of divine condemnation could be cited, but Bell either avoids these passages or misses their meaning.

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