

## Christ's Proclamation to the "Spirits in Prison": Who, What, When?

1 Peter 3:18-20

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As we continue our study of 1 Peter, today we will be looking at **one of the most difficult passages** in all of Scripture. If you read the various commentaries you will discover that there are **several different views** on what **they think** Peter is trying to say. Today I want to evaluate those views and share **what** I think Peter is saying and **why** I think that. Fair enough?

Now because of the complexity involved, today's study is going to require more of you, the listener, than is normally the case. So I want to ask you to **really pay attention and try to follow my argument**. In doing so, you will be applying Paul's advice to Timothy. **Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.** (2 Timothy 2:15).

Let's begin with a word of prayer and ask God to help us. *"Father, as we approach your Word this morning we ask that you would guide us into the truth. Help us to discern what it is that you want your people to know, understand and obey from this portion of your word. We ask this in Jesus' name, Amen."*

Anytime you are faced with a difficult passages of Scripture you want to make sure that you understand the **broader context** in which the passage under study is found. That's because what's going on **immediately before and after** it may shed light on its meaning. So let's begin by examining the flow of Peter's argument, from the beginning of the book up until our passage which is found in chapter 3 beginning at verse 18.

Peter is writing to Christians who are being persecuted for their faith. In such circumstances, it is easy to **lose hope**. It is tempting to **compromise your faith**. And so Peter writes this letter to give these suffering believers some **divine perspective** on their trials. He writes to **encourage** them to endure persecution without wavering in their faith. He writes to give them hope.

And he focuses our hope, not on **this** life, but on **the** next. He does so because, as Christians, we are **going to suffer** for our counter-cultural beliefs and values. And so Peter begins his letter this way...

**Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 1:3-7)**

Peter is saying, "Yes there is suffering now, but **a day is coming** when **all that will end**, and you will **receive the inheritance** which Jesus purchased for you on the cross. But in the meantime, **live a life of holiness, reverence and love.**"

**As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior... (1:14-15)**

**Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart... (1:22)**

And then he goes on to talk about **living out our calling** in this world. "Church, do you know who we are, as God's people?" Peter tells us...

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light... (2:9)

Church, this is who we are! Therefore he says, **"Live that way!"**

Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul. Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation. (2:11-12)

Peter is saying: The world is watching you. Don't give them ammunition with which to accuse you. And when you find yourselves **suffering** as a result of your faith, choose to **respond** in a manner that will **glorify God** and make him **attractive to others**. And then he gives **specifics** about what that looks like in various domains of life. Specifically he mentions **government**, your **marriage** and your **vocation**. If you want an example of someone who endured unjust suffering, Peter says: Consider Jesus' response. He didn't lash back at his enemies, he patiently entrusted himself to God. And what would that look like for us? Again, Peter tells us.

To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing. (3:8-9)

He goes on to remind us that our suffering can lead to **an opportunity to share our faith**.

But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. And do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled, but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence... (3:14-15)

In other words, **great good** can come out of our suffering, **if** we are suffering for the right reasons. In fact, Peter tells us that **sometimes it is God's will that we suffer**.

It is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong. (3:17)

Simply stated, the principle is this: **Unjust suffering is always better than deserved punishment!**

That brings us to today's challenging passage. The question we need to answer is, **"How is 1 Peter 3:18-20 (the passage we are studying today) connected to the context out of which it flows?"** Peter has been talking about the undeserved suffering his Christian readers are having to endure. He wants them to know that God understands their plight, because Jesus himself endured undeserved suffering. That is why he says,

For Christ also died for sins (in other words, he too suffered unjustly) once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God... (3:18)

I think Peter is reasoning this way: Just as Jesus endured **unjust suffering** for **our** salvation, so we are blessed by God if **we** endure unjust suffering for the salvation of others—in the sense that **our suffering offers an opportunity for gospel witness**. Now, none of this is difficult to understand. Peter's logic

seems straightforward up to this point. As we move forward in the text, Peter's mind seems to be drawn to another **well-known** individual who also **bore witness** to God while being **persecuted for his beliefs**. That person was Noah. But this is where it gets confusing. Let me read it to you, and we'll try to figure it out together. Are you ready?

For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, 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. (3:18-20)

That Peter is describing **Jesus' victory** over sin and death and demonic forces is clear. His death wasn't a defeat, but the once-for-all sacrifice that atoned for sin. It was followed by his **triumphant resurrection** and ascension back to heaven. But what is all this business about Jesus' preaching to some imprisoned spirits? What's that all about? Peter's original audience may well have understood his meaning because they were privileged to some cultural data that has been lost to later generations.

Martin Luther writes in his commentary: *"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 just what Peter means."*  
(Martin Luther, Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude, Kregel, 1982, p. 168.)

Now while the study of this passage may have progressed since Luther's day, his confession of confusion warns us against being **overly dogmatic** in **our** answers!

As we look at this passage, there are several questions that need to be answered. First of all...

**1. Who are these spirits in prison?** Several answers have been postulated by theologians.

- Old Testament unbelievers who are in hell?
- The righteous dead awaiting their release from prison?
- Fallen angels?

One of the things that complicates the identity of these spirits is the fact that the term "spirits" is used to refer to **both humans and fallen angels** in the Bible. The context determines who is in view. For example, in Matthew 18, it clearly refers to **demons**.

When evening came, they brought to Him many who were demon-possessed; and He cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were ill. (Matthew 8:16)

In Acts 7, the term "spirit" clearly refers to a human.

They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!"  
(Acts 7:59)

So the **term itself** isn't helpful in determining whether these imprisoned spirits are demonic or human. We have to look for other clues.

A second question that is debated in this passage is, "What was the message that Jesus preached?" There have been many suggestions.

## 2. What did Jesus preach?

- A second chance for salvation?
- The completion of Jesus' redemptive work?
- An announcement of final condemnation?

And then there is the question of: "When did Jesus preach?"

## 3. When did Jesus preach?

- In the days of Noah?
- Between his death and resurrection?
- Between his resurrection and ascension?

When you put all of these options together, four popular views emerge.

**View 1:** When Noah was building the ark, Christ 'in spirit' was in Noah preaching **repentance and righteousness** through him to **unbelievers** who were on the earth then, but who are now 'spirits in prison' (people in Hell).

**View 2:** Between Christ's death and resurrection, he went and offered a **second chance** for salvation to people in Hell.

**View 3:** Between Jesus death and resurrection, He proclaimed his **triumph** over sin and death and the finality of condemnation to those in Hell.

**View 4:** Between Jesus' resurrection and ascension he declared his victory and their doom, to fallen angels in hell who had sinned in the days of Noah by marrying human women before the great flood occurred.

Views 2 and 3 are very similar, the only difference being the **content** of Jesus' preaching. Did he offer these human spirits in hell a second chance at salvation-view 2, or did he merely announce their final condemnation, view 3?

	When?	What?	Who?
<b>View 2</b>	Between his death & resurrection	Second chance for salvation	Dead unbelievers
<b>View 3</b>	Between his death & resurrection	His triumph is final and their condemnation is final	Dead unbelievers

I think that we should dismiss both of these views. First of all, there is **no biblical evidence** outside of possibly **this** passage that Jesus **ever** went to hell. If he did, it was a quick trip, for he told the thief on the cross who repented, "This day you will see me in Paradise." And I promise you, Hell is no Paradise!

Further evidence against view 2 is the lack of any biblical evidence that you get a second crack at salvation after you die. In fact, the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16 makes it clear that **there are no second chances**. Furthermore, [Hebrews 9:27](#) says,

"And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die **once** and **after this** comes judgment."

Furthermore, views 2 and 3 don't build upon the argument Peter has been advancing in the immediate context. Remember, Peter is arguing that **just as** Jesus' willingness to suffer unjustly led to our salvation, **so** our willingness to suffer unjustly can provide an opportunity for us to share our faith.

Of these four views I've mentioned, only view number one maintains this parallel, which is one of the reasons I prefer it. But before we get to View #1, how about View #4? Let me state it again.

**View 4:** Between Jesus' resurrection and ascension he declared his victory and their doom, to fallen angels in hell who had sinned in the days of Noah by marrying human women before the great flood occurred.

Those who hold this view cite as evidence an event that transpired in [Genesis 6:1-8](#). Let me read it to you.

Now it came about, when men began to multiply on the face of the land, and daughters were born to them, that the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful; and they took wives for themselves, whomever they chose. Then the Lord said, "My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, because he also is flesh; nevertheless his days shall be one hundred and twenty years." The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men, and they bore children to them. Those were the mighty men who were of old, men of renown. Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. The Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. The Lord said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, from man to animals to creeping things and to birds of the sky; for I am sorry that I have made them." But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord.

Drawing upon a story from an ancient Jewish book called, *First Enoch*, adherents of this view contend that the term "sons of God" is a reference to fallen angels who cohabited with human women and gave birth to a race of giants called Nephilim.

*First Enoch*, which was **supposedly** written by the same Enoch that is referred to in Genesis chapter 5, tells the elaborate story of fallen angels who abandoned heaven, slept with women, and produced children who were giants. These evil angels then taught the people to do shameful things. So the story goes, Enoch brings a message of judgment from God to these evil angels. Some commentators believe that Peter is drawing upon this extra-biblical story and teaching that Jesus also went to hell and delivered his own verdict of judgment upon these evil angels.

While I can appreciate the similarities between *First Enoch* and the story in Genesis chapter 6, I find it **unpersuasive** for a number of reasons. **First**, I am hesitant to draw conclusions on the meaning of an **obscure biblical account** by citing evidence from an **obscure non-biblical source**. Historically, we know that the book of Enoch was **rejected** by the Jewish people as being a part of their Holy Scriptures, as they **did not** believe it to be inspired by God. **Second**, that phrase "sons of God" in Genesis 6 **is** used elsewhere in the Bible to refer to people; it's **never** used to refer to angels. **Third**, there is **no biblical evidence** that angels have the ability to procreate. In fact, the evidence suggest just the opposite. It suggests that God created the angels in the beginning, and that their number remains static. **Fourth**, this interpretation of the text of 1 Peter **doesn't advance Peter's argument** that our underserved suffering provides an opportunity to share our faith.

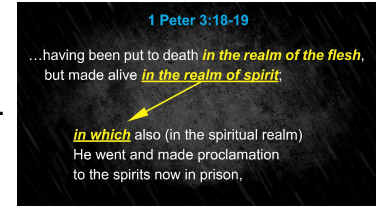
Which brings me to View #1. Let me state it for you again.



**View 1:** When Noah was building the ark, Christ 'in spirit' was in Noah preaching repentance and righteousness through him to unbelievers who were on the earth then but are now 'spirits in prison' (people in hell).

Although we cannot be certain, I think this view has the most to commend it. Let's go back to the text of 1 Peter, and read it with this interpretation in mind.

In other words, **in the realm of the spirit**, through the preaching of Noah, Jesus made proclamation to the spirits who are **now** in prison.



Well, **who are** these spirits in prison to whom Christ made a proclamation in the spiritual realm? Peter gives us some clues. It is those... **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. (3:20)**

Here we find **four defining phrases** that help us **clarify** who these spirits are.

- "who once were disobedient"
- "when the patience of God kept waiting"
- "in the days of Noah"
- "during the building of the ark"

I think that these phrases, taken together, indicate that these can only be **human** spirits. Nowhere in the Bible, or in Jewish literature outside of the Bible, are angels ever said to have disobeyed "during the building of the ark." But Genesis 6:13-15 makes it clear that it is **human** sin that prompted God to flood the earth in judgment.

**Then God said to Noah, "The end of all flesh has come before Me; for the earth is filled with violence because of them; and behold, I am about to destroy them with the earth. "Make for yourself an ark... (Genesis 6:13-14)**

The phrase, "When the patience of God kept waiting God's waiting in the days of Noah" also suggests **human**, rather than **angelic**, disobedience. God's patience waited for **human beings** to repent, before bringing the judgment of the flood. There is **no hint** in the Scriptures that fallen angels have the opportunity to repent (cf. 2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6).

But we may ask, "**Why** does Peter refer to these disobedient humans as 'spirits'?" Well, that is what they **now** are. During the days of Noah they were humans with bodies **and** spirits, but when Peter was writing, they are **imprisoned spirits**. They had already died on gone to their eternal destination. I think Peter's point is that Jesus, through the preaching of Noah, called Noah's generation to repent. They did not, and as a result, they are now prisoners in hell.

Interestingly, in 2 Peter 2:5 Peter refers to Noah as a "preacher of righteousness". Now, perhaps you are thinking that it's odd to portray Jesus as preaching **through** a human instrument. Actually, it's not so odd. Look with me at 2 Corinthians...

**Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. (2 Corinthians 5:20)**

Paul is saying that when **we** share our faith with our unbelieving friends, in a very real sense, **God is making an appeal through us**. I believe that in a similar way, through Noah, God made an appeal to Noah's generation. Understood in this way, this passage fits well with the broader argument Peter is

making is this section of his letter. Remember, he has been arguing that just as Jesus' willingness to suffer unjustly led to our salvation, so our willingness to suffer unjustly can provide an opportunity for us to share our faith.

Noah is a great example of this. Like Peter's readers, Noah was a man of faith surrounded by ungodly people. The Bible tells us that he was a preacher of righteousness (2 Peter 2:5), and no doubt he warned his contemporaries of God's coming judgment in the form of a flood. Noah was mocked for his warning, and he was mocked for building a boat in the middle of the desert. Yet he continued to call his friends and neighbors to repent, and invited them to demonstrate their repentance and faith in God by entering into the safety of the ark. But they rejected his warning, and perished in the flood.

So in this passage, I think Peter is saying that Noah is yet another example of how unjust suffering can provide us with an opportunity to point people to God. They may not respond to God's offer of mercy, but at least they know that they have an opportunity to respond.

Now, while this is a notoriously difficult passage, in my mind, this interpretation has the most to commend it. But whatever conclusion you come to, we can all agree on Peter's major emphasis in this part of his letter. Let me state it clearly for you:

**Our willingness to endure suffering or ridicule for the sake of Christ, is grounded in the wonder of Christ's willingness to suffer death for our sake. And while Jesus' unjust suffering and death may have at first appeared to be a defeat, it was in fact, a great victory over sin, death and all of the powers of darkness. When we imitate Jesus by patiently enduring unjust suffering, it provides us with a great opportunity to point others to God.**

This is the message that Peter does not want us to miss.

Alright, let's talk **Application/Challenge...**

1. Learn to handle all passages of Scripture—whether they're easy to understand or difficult—with careful observation and interpretation. Remember: **"Context is King!"**

Remember [2 Timothy 2:15](#) Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.

2. View your own unjust suffering in light of Jesus' redemptive victory on the cross.

Life isn't always going to be fair. We need to rid ourselves of that expectation. Sometimes God allows us to suffer in order to accomplish purposes that are more important than our personal comfort!

3. Use your suffering as an opportunity to point others to Jesus as Savior.

Jesus may want to make a proclamation through you, just as he did through Noah. Think about that, the next time you suffer unjustly!

**Let's pray together...**

*Father, we want to be able to accurately handle the word of truth; we don't want to be ashamed when we stand before you one day. We want to hear the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant."*

*Father, we recognize that our culture, by and large, has rejected You and your authority in the moral realm. And that means that as your "set apart people," we are going to experience push back and persecution.*

*Consequently, we will suffer unjustly for our faith. Remind us when we do, that we are merely following in Jesus' footsteps. In those times, give us the courage and the gentleness to speak about you, and your great love for a lost humanity. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*