

In search of...



Truth & Right

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Spirits in Prison

In a discussion on suffering for righteousness sake, Peter turns to Jesus as an example.

"For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water" (1 Peter 3:18-20).

Our Lord, Jesus, died a cruel

death on the cross. He did not die because of any crime that he committed. He died because he was righteous, and he allowed it to happen for the sake of the unrighteous. By his great sacrifice we have been freed from sin (Romans 6:17-23). Through this sacrifice Jesus has brought us close to our God, the Father (Ephesians 2:16-18). In a sense we were dead, but we are now alive. But our salvation was not just accomplished by Jesus. The Holy Spirit also had a hand in our salvation (Ephesians 2:18; Romans 8:16). Notice that this is one of several verses which mention all three parts of

the Godhead, though this is not the clearest of the verses.

The context is easy to grasp, but many people stumble when they reach I Peter 3:19. Many fanciful arguments have been made concerning this verse's meaning which are not supported by any other verse in the Bible. Before we start imagining something that is not there, let us examine what this verse actually tells us in its entirety.

Do you remember being taught the five questions that should be asked to fully understand a situation? The questions are who, what, when, where, and how. Let us ask these questions of this verse and see if it does not shed greater light on its meaning.

First, who are we talking about? The subject of the verse is "He." The "He" refers back to Christ who was discussed in I Peter 3:18.

Second, what did Christ do? He preached, or proclaimed, to the spirits in prison. This leads us to another "who" question. Who were these spirits in prison? It is answered in I Peter 3:20. The spirits in prison were the disobedient people who lived during the days while Noah was building the ark.

So how did Christ do this preaching? This is answered by the "in which" or "by whom" at the start of the verse. The phrase refers back to what was last mentioned in I Peter 3:18. We were made alive in the Spirit and by that same means, Christ preached to the spirits in prison. Take careful note that this verse does not say that Jesus directly

preached to the spirits in prison. That proclamation was done through the Spirit.

So then, how does Christ preach through the Spirit? Earlier Peter discussed the role of the prophets in our salvation (I Peter 1:10-12). These prophets spoke concerning our salvation, but they did not understand what was being revealed to them by the Spirit of Christ. This same Spirit is called the Holy Spirit in I Peter 1:12. The Spirit of Christ is another name for the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the spirit sent by Christ from heaven. This is similar to the promise Jesus made to his disciples in John 14:16-18. By sending the Spirit, Jesus said he would come to the disciples. However, Peter is referring to an earlier sending of the Spirit by Jesus. The prophets during the time of the Old Testament were inspired by the same Spirit sent by Christ. In fact all prophecy comes from God through the work of the Holy Spirit (II Peter 1:19-21).

But there is another way that Holy Spirit can be seen as the Spirit of Christ. The message that the prophets brought was of the coming salvation of man through the sufferings of the Christ. It was a message about Jesus, and that message was brought by the Holy Spirit, who inspired the messengers. This viewpoint is brought out in the last phrase in Revelation 19:10: "For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophesy."

Yet, we haven't finished fully exploring how the Spirit brought Christ's message to the disobedient people who lived during the days of Noah. The Spirit

did not speak directly to each person but had his message delivered by holy men of God. Who was the messenger during the days Noah was preparing the ark? It was Noah himself, a preacher of righteousness (II Peter 2:5). He spoke against the wickedness of his world, not just through words but by his very actions. Noah believed the warning of God. He built the ark in accordance to God's plan, and when he and his family stepped into the ark, he condemned the wickedness of the world by his actions (Hebrews 11:7).

I Peter 3:18-20 does not directly state where this proclamation to the spirits in prison took place. Some assume, that because I Peter 3:18 spoke of Jesus' death, the message was delivered by Jesus after his death when he spent three days in hades. Reread the passage again and notice that the verse does not say this. In fact, such an assumption contradicts the plain teaching elsewhere in the Bible that our final destiny is determined by our lives in this world (I Peter 1:17). We will not receive a second chance after death.

If we understand that Noah was the messenger of the Spirit of Christ to the people of his day, then we understand that the proclamation went forth while Noah worked on the ark. When the message was delivered is stated in I Peter 3:20. The message was delivered while Noah prepared the ark, when the longsuffering God waited for Noah to complete his task.

This leaves us one more question: Why are the disobedient

referred to as spirits in prison? Some assume (there's that word again) that the prison is hades, but this is not necessarily so. David prayed to God to deliver his spirit from prison in Psalm 142:6-7. He felt entrapped by the wicked people surrounding him and he wanted to be set free. In fact, sin itself is a prison. It brings people into captivity (Romans 7:23; II Timothy 3:6). The prison here is not the prison of physical death but the bondage of sin that chains each sinner. The people of Noah's day did not heed the message of salvation. They remained in their cells, imprisoned by their own disobedience to God.

Throughout the ages, the message of salvation through the death of Jesus Christ has been preached. The world in Noah's day was overflowing with evil. Yet, even in this low point in the history of mankind, God had salvation proclaimed to mankind. These spirits, imprisoned by their own sins, did not heed the message, but they had a chance. Only eight souls were saved from that wicked world. Yet today this same message is offered again - not of a future salvation but of a salvation already accomplished by the death of Jesus upon the cross. How many today will heed the warning? You have a chance this very hour. Break the bonds of sin through obedience to Jesus Christ.

Jeffrey W. Hamilton

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92 Rose Cottage Ln.
Wellsburg, WV 26070
304-737-1422

<http://www.truthandright.org>

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Psalm Ninety-Six

E O T V C L M E L K E K N N B O V M K R
J E P Z E D O Z S T H V X T Y M E K H Y
E M D Z A Y Y Z S Z R E S O U N D G Q P
F R E G B H H S S V N H G E Y H C C K W
B D D Y F P T C O C S W R L J H G I E N
R M H L T R G F F I A E U F W V M J A V
W S J S P O E T F L N A T I O N S G R Z
M D K L L C U P E W C J P E T V S Q T I
K U D I Q L F G R I T I L L H B L I H U
Y H Y O D A S J I L U Y P D O T L U F F
G Y B X R I L E N K A H P S U B X Z P H
J X E C O M I N G B R L B Q J V P Z P E
F P K T P X S B S H Y W F J R G Z B L A
E D Z B E U C C R E M R C F E A R E D V
J L K A S C R M Z M E K T D D L Z I M E
W A R T F F L G J A E W D L J V Z G O N
K A M I U J F Z N I G Y B K M E S W H S
T F S C Y J N Q S S D K W O R S H I P M
I F N M J P L H E E Z A L H M C U Y E V
S F H K J S A S I S I S Y Z X P N U V M
F K S T H L G U I N R R Z A E G L O R Y

- "...sing to the Lord, all the Earth." (vs. 1)
- "...proclaim His salvation from day to day." (vs. 2)
- "...Declare His glory among the nations..." (vs. 3)
- "...He is feared above all gods." (vs. 4)
- "...but the Lord made the heavens." (vs. 5)
- "...strength and beauty are in His sanctuary." (vs. 6)
- "...bring an offering and enter His courts." (vs. 8)
- "Worship the Lord in the splendor of His holiness..." (vs. 9)
- "Say among the nations: 'The Lord reigns...' (vs. 10)
- "...let the sea and all that fills it resound." (vs. 11)
- "Let the fields and everything in them exult..." (vs. 12)
- "...for He is coming to judge the Earth." (vs. 13)