

THE SPIRITS IN PRISON

An Exegesis of 1 Peter 3:18-20

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For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: by which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison; which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing...” (1 Pet. 3:18-20)

The sacrificial offering of Jesus Christ justified his people and reconciled them to God. His crucifixion, burial, and resurrection saved his people from their sins. (*Mat. 1:21, Isa. 53:6, 1 Pet. 2:24, 2 Cor. 5:21, Heb. 10:14, 2 Cor. 5:18, Eph. 2:13, Rom. 5:8-10, 1 Cor. 15:3-4*)

In Peter’s epistle, he described the crucifixion of Jesus from man’s vantage point. He described it in the same manner on the day of Pentecost: “*by wicked hands*” Christ was “*crucified and slain:*” (*Acts 2:23*). However, Jesus described the crucifixion in terms of fulfilling God’s will, “*...I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again...*” (*John 10:17-18*). He allowed them to “*kill the body*” (*Mat. 10:28*). They could only do what he suffered them to do (*Mat. 26:51-53 & John 19:10-11*). He was in control the whole time. (*Luke 23:46 & John 19:30*). The instant he “*gave up the ghost*”, He (along with one of the thieves on the crosses) went to paradise/heaven (*Luke 23:42-43*). After the lifeless body of Jesus had rested in the tomb for three days and nights, the Spirit of Jesus descended from paradise to inhabit the body and live on earth again for forty days. Afterward, he ascended back to heaven in His glorified body (*Acts 1:11*).

The word “*spirits*”, in this context, refers to human souls who have left the body. When children of God (the elect) die, their souls immediately go to paradise/heaven (*Gen. 35:29, 49:33, Psa. 90:10, Luke 16:22, 23:43, 2 Cor. 5:8*). When the unregenerate (non-elect) die, their souls immediately go to hell (*Luke 16:22-23, 2 Pet. 2:4, Rev. 20:13-15*). Hell is a place of everlasting punishment for the unredeemed (*Mat. 25:46*). The expression “*spirits in*

prison” refers to the souls of the unregenerate in hell. They are kept in this prison until the end of time when they will be reunited with their resurrected bodies and condemned to eternal punishment in the lake of fire. (*Mat. 25:41, John 5:28-29, Acts 24:14-15, Rev. 20:11-15*). The Bible contains other applications of “*hell*” including the whale’s belly (*Jonah 2:2*), the grave (*Acts 2:25-31*), etc. However, we are using the word as it applies to a place of eternal, conscious separation from God.

Peter tells us that Christ “*went and preached unto the spirits in prison*” (*1 Pet. 3:18-19*). To illustrate Peter’s meaning, consider the following sentence: The attorney prosecuted the men in prison. The attorney did not prosecute in prison. The men in prison were prosecuted by the attorney. They were prosecuted in a courtroom prior to their imprisonment. Christ did not preach in hell. The spirits in hell were preached to by Christ. Christ preached to them on earth *when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing.* *

Christ was not dwelling on earth, *in the likeness of sinful flesh* (*Rom. 8:3*), during the time of Noah. He was not “*made flesh*” (*John 1:14*) until about two thousand years after the worldwide flood. How then did Jesus preach in Noah’s day before he was embodied in human flesh? Peter tells us that it was by the Spirit that Christ “*went and preached unto the spirits in prison...in the days of Noah*”. Noah was “*a preacher of righteousness*” (*2 Pet. 2:5*). He was the instrument through which the Spirit of Christ preached “*while the ark was a preparing*”. Noah preached with his actions. He prepared an ark and thereby “*condemned the world*” (*Heb. 11:7*).

What is the relevant application of Noah’s example? Christians should preach with their actions more than their words. I once heard someone say, “We should preach everywhere we go and, if necessary, speak.” Actions speak much louder than words (*Jas. 2:18, Tit. 1:16*). Noah didn’t spend his time protesting the wicked. He condemned the world by doing his father’s business (*Luke 2:49, Acts 10:38*). We ought to do the same and live in such a way that our epitaph would be the same as his, “*Noah walked with God*” (*Gen. 6:9*).

Not everyone killed in the flood went to hell, but a portion of the people in hell were killed in the flood. Heaven will contain people “...out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation...*” (*Rev. 5:9*). This includes people from all the kindreds, tongues, peoples, and nations which no longer existed after the flood in Noah’s day.

