

FIRST PETER

Lesson 17

Christ the Victor

1 Peter 3:18-22

First Peter 3:18-22 is one of the most difficult passages in this book to interpret—and perhaps one of the most difficult in the Bible. No one can be dogmatic on his interpretation of this passage. Even Martin Luther said that God alone knows for sure the meaning of this passage, and my interpretation essentially agrees with Luther's.

The particular interpretation I will give may boggle your mind, frenzy your nerves, and seem to border on fantasy, but please hear me out to the end, and then make a judgment.

All expositors agree that the purpose of this passage is to comfort and encourage Christians with the thought that blessing always follows suffering for well doing, and before one can experience glory, he must first experience suffering. Exaltation comes after one has suffered. This basic truth is the only thing we can dogmatically be sure of.

In 1 Peter 3:18b-20, we are given a glimpse of what Christ did from the time he died to His resurrection; that is, Christ in spirit was actively doing certain things while His physical body was resting in the tomb.

VICTORIOUS OVER DEATH (3:18)

“For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God.”

In 1 Peter 3:13-17, the Apostle Peter has been encouraging the Christians about suffering for doing good; that is, suffering unjustly as Christians. Peter turned his readers to the perfect example of Christ who suffered and died for sins that He, in His death, might bring us to God. He brought every Christian to God by suffering unjustly. If Christ suffered unjustly, we who are Christians can also suffer unjustly so that through our testimony in suffering, unsaved men and women might be attracted to Christ and brought to God.

“having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit”

Concealed within these words is a wealth of spiritual truth. The phrase “having been put to death in the flesh” is quite easy to understand; it refers to Christ's physical body being put to death through crucifixion. The second phrase “but made alive in the spirit” is not so easy to understand. Some have attempted to make “spirit” refer to the Holy Spirit, indicating that the Holy Spirit was the agent in bringing Christ back from the dead. It is true that the Holy Spirit had a part in raising Christ from the dead (Rom. 8:11), but this does not seem to be what is being taught in this context.

It is better to take this as the human spirit of Christ, and the spirit is in contrast with the flesh. Actually, there are only two steps in the process which are stated explicitly. Jesus was put to death in the human flesh, and in the human spirit. He was made alive in the human spirit and made alive in the human flesh. The truth here is that Jesus died in His spirit as well as His body. Christ not only died physically, but He died spiritually as well. He experienced spiritual death, which is separation of the soul, spirit and body from God.

The process of this spiritual death began when Christ cried out on the cross, *“My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me”* (Matt. 27:46). The word “forsaken” means “to abandon, to desert, to leave in the lurch.” At that moment, God the Father and God the Holy Spirit (“my God, my God”) abandoned and deserted Christ, and total fellowship with God was broken. Christ’s sinless spirit and body hung on that cross as the perfect sacrifice, and He died spiritually as well as physically.

Yet, Christ, also had to die for the consequences of spiritual death which is eternal death; that is, total separation from God, body, soul and spirit, for all eternity. Jesus Christ had to experience hell. If He was to be our substitution, then He had to die spiritually and eternally in our place.

Our sins were so hideous and horrible there was nothing God could do but put us in hell, except if there could be a sin-bearer, a substitute, who could die physically, spiritually and eternally in our place. Jesus Christ bore our penalty of physical, spiritual and eternal death in full. He died and went into the depths of hell that He might bring us to God. He experienced the full force and intensity of hell, so He could keep you and me from going there.

But Christ did not remain in hell. His spirit was “made alive” after this period of separation from God. Christ was taken out of hell, for Psalm 16:10 says, *“Thou wilt not abandon my soul to Sheol; neither will Thou allow Thy Holy One to see the pit.”*

In the New Testament, which is a quote from Psalm 16:10, we read in Acts 2:27 (which is a definite reference to the Lord Jesus Christ), *“Because Thou wilt not abandon my soul to Hades, nor allow Thy Holy One to undergo decay.”*

God the Father and God the Spirit allowed Jesus’ spirit to go into hell (Sheol-Hades) but did not abandon Him there. God made Him alive in the spirit; that is, Jesus came back from spiritual and eternal death and rose victorious over them.

Hell is not only a place, but it is primarily a condition. Hell is total separation from God, complete punishment from God and eternal in duration. It is total absence of the favor of God; total separation from God; and eternal suffering in body, soul and spirit. Hell is a place and a condition of total broken fellowship with God. Hell is existence apart from God. Hell is hell because God is not there.

In 2 Thessalonians 1:9, it says of those who have not obeyed the gospel that when Christ comes back in His Second Advent, He will judge them *“and they will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power.”* Rejectors of Christ will be excluded from the presence of God and the glory of His power, and that is what hell is.

It is the presence of God which makes life worth living. All the qualities of life which are worthwhile come from God: love, friends, fun, creativity, music, companionship, comfort, laughter, humor, joy. All of these come from God, and when God is absent, these things cease to be. Not one person, saved or unsaved, has ever

experienced this in this life. God is still present in this world and even takes care of rejectors of Him in common grace. But there will come a time, if a person refuses to acknowledge Christ as God's Son and only Redeemer, that God will give him what he wants.

That rejector has lived a life on this earth of fleeing from the presence of God and His Son Christ Jesus, so God will allow him to die physically and he will experience eternal death in hell where there is no laughter, joy or delight but only suffering because God is not there. God will give that rejector in eternity what he demanded in life—eternal separation from God. The more a man fights coming to Christ and bowing to God in this life, the more he will begin to experience “hell on earth,” but unless he turns to Christ in faith and repentance, he will surely experience eternal hell—separation from the presence of God for all eternity.

Some have actually translated 2 Thessalonians 1:9 this way: *“And they will pay the penalty of eternal exclusion, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power.”*

Separation, spiritual and eternal, is what Jesus experienced. He died for sin in His sinless body, the just for the unjust, and He went to hell in His human spirit, but He was made alive.

VICTORIOUS OVER DEMONS WHO SINNED IN THE DAYS OF NOAH (3:19-20a)

“in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison”

The “in which” is a definite reference to the human spirit of Christ which was made alive, and when made alive in His spirit, Christ went to spirits in prison and made a proclamation.

The first question is: Who are the spirits? These spirits are either men or angels. It is not likely that the spirits are men because rarely in scripture are men, whether living or dead, referred to as spirits, and when they are, they are qualified as men. *“But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels (spirits)”* (Heb. 12:22). Also, if these are spirits of men, why did Jesus make a proclamation to these men who lived in the days of Noah and to no other men? It seems, therefore, that the best choice is to refer to spirits as angels. Quite often in the Bible spirits are a reference to good angels.

“And of the angels He says, ‘WHO MAKES HIS ANGELS WINDS, AND HIS MINISTERS A FLAME OF FIRE’” (Heb. 1:7).

“Are they not all ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation?” (Heb. 1:14)

“But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels” (Heb, 12:22).

However, sometimes spirits are referred to as demons or evil angels. *“And 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” (Matt. 8:16).* Demons have many qualities but one specific quality is that they like to take up residence in the physical bodies of men and women and sometimes animals (Matt. 12:43-45). This may infer that at one time some demons may have had physical bodies, and being deprived of them, through some judgment of God, they tried to satisfy their innate desire for a physical existence in that way.

These spirits in 1 Peter 3:19 are specifically said to be in “prison.” According to the Bible, there are just two places where evil spirits are confined, the Abyss or the Bottomless Pit (Rev. 9:1-12) and Tartarus (2 Pet. 2:4).

According to 2 Peter 2:4-5, there is a special class of angels said to be confined to Tartarus:

“For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell (Tartarus) 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” (2 Pet. 2:4-5).

Apparently, these angels were confined there for something that occurred during the time of Noah and are linked up with the Flood. These, then are wicked, evil demons confined in the prison of Tartarus. Jesus went to Tartarus to proclaim a message to these evil angels.

The Greek word is *karruso*, which means “to declare a message.” The content of the message is not specified. Christ did not go to Tartarus to declare the gospel to these fallen angels, for had He done this He would have used the word *uangelizo* which means “to declare good news” implying the gospel of Christ. The word “went” means “one traveling” or “one on a journey.”

It becomes obvious that some time after His death Christ descended into Tartarus to make a proclamation to fallen angels. The Apostles’ Creed, which says “he descended into hell,” has much merit, and was an important fact to the early church. However, that “hell” was literally Tartarus, the prison of evil angels or demons, who did some hideous sin at the time of Noah.

“who were once disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark”

The “who” refers to these demons (wicked angels) who were disobedient at the time of the Flood in Noah’s day. Again 2 Peter 2:4 speaks of “angels when they sinned” and this is connected with Noah and the Flood (2 Peter 2:4-5). This was a class of wicked angels confined to Tartarus, and they were confined there because of something that occurred during the time of Noah.

Now it is interesting that in extra-biblical literature light is shed on the meaning of Tartarus. In the Book of Enoch (22:2), Gehenna is said to be the place of dead apostate Jews, and Tartarus of fallen angels. The Greek poet Homer used the term “Hades” as the

place for dead men, and Tartarus as a murky abyss beneath Hades for fallen mortals. Jude, verse 6, says, “*Angels who did not keep their own domain, but abandoned their proper abode, He has kept in eternal bonds.*”

Thus far we have seen a group of angels who apparently rebelled against God, left their original abode, becoming demons, and did some horrible sin at the time of Noah and the world-wide Flood. Then in verse 7 Jude likens the sin of these wicked angels to the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah. The people of Sodom and Gomorrah gave themselves over to gross sexual immorality, including homosexuality, because they went after “strange flesh” (literally, flesh of another kind).

Just as the men and women in Sodom and Gomorrah on a mass scale left the natural realm of God’s special order for an unnatural order and became guilty of homosexuality and lesbianism, each going after strange flesh, so these wicked angels went after strange flesh or flesh of another kind. Wicked angels were somehow guilty of going after strange human flesh in some kind of sexual fornication.

In the Apocryphal book of Enoch (12:4) angels are said to have abandoned the high heaven and defiled themselves with women.

Peter’s statement about demons going after strange flesh presupposes an understanding of Genesis 6:1-4 which seems to teach that just before the Flood, fallen angels invaded the human race and brought into the world wicked offspring who were so vile it necessitated the destruction of the world. Because the demons were guilty of this fornication, they were imprisoned in Tartarus.

“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.” (Gen. 6:1-4).

In the Genesis account of the events leading up to the Flood, we are told that “*the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually*” (Gen. 6:5), and so great was this evil that God was sorry He had made man and would blot them out (Gen 6:7).

What was this evil that made God decide to destroy the human race? The key is found in Genesis 6:2, “*...that the sons of God saw the daughters of men were beautiful; and they took wives for themselves, whomever they chose.*” The “sons of God” most likely refers to angels because this term always refers to angels in the Old Testament (Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7). (Some of the manuscripts of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, actually use a word which means “angels of God” because this was a common interpretation in ancient times.)

These demonic beings cohabited with the daughters of men who were so wicked that they had opened themselves to all kinds of demonic activity. The result of this sexual union between angels and women was offspring called “the Nephilim” which means “the fallen ones.” These people, half angel and half human, were supermen, described as

“mighty men who were of old, men of renown”—hideous, horrifying, powerful, violent, extremely clever—who ruled the earth in those days.

The crossing of fallen angels and humans produced monstrosities. We know how demon-possessed people in the Gospels were so strong they could break chains; how strong could men be if demons somehow got into their genetic makeup!

God had to destroy the human race to keep it pure. The Nephilim were destroyed in the Flood, and the demons who possessed them were imprisoned in Tartarus. Why would God have to bring such a cataclysmic judgment if this was just sexual immorality between humans? Mere human perversion of sex went on then and is going on now. No, the sin in the days of Noah was so great it brought judgment upon the human race which was about to become extinct.

The Nephilim were judged in the Flood along with the sexually corrupted people. Such an invasion of wicked angels into the human race showed up once again after the Flood as indicated in Gen. 6:4 “...and also afterward.” and confirmed in Numbers 13:33 when the spies went into the land and reported back, “*There also we saw Nephilim (the sons of Anak are part of the Nephilim).*” This explains why God commanded all the inhabitants of Canaan to be killed because they were a race corrupted by demonic powers.

The Nephilim in Genesis 6 may also explain the demigods in Greek mythology who were called Titans. They were partly celestial and partly terrestrial in origin. Titans were children of Uranus (heaven) and Gaea (earth) who were portrayed as humans with angelic wings and features. They had incredible strength. The Titans rebelled against heaven (Uranus) and were later defeated by Zeus. These twelve sons of Uranus were confined to Tartarus in chains, far under the earth, far below Hades the place of the human dead.

If you sense that the angel theory is far fetched, I want to remind you that this view was held by most Jewish scholars such as Philo and Josephus. The very early church fathers such as Martyr and Tertullian taught this view. Also men like Martin Luther subscribed to it.

Let us conclude that the Nephilim were destroyed in the Flood. The demons who possessed those creatures were imprisoned in Tartarus. It was to these demons in prison that Jesus, after His death and before His resurrection, went to make a proclamation of victory. Why should He do this?

The invasion of the demons into the human race at the time of Noah was a great Satanic plot to destroy the human race. If there were no pure humans, there could never have been a God-Man, Jesus Christ, to be the redeemer. Genesis 3:15 speaks of the seed of the woman which has been taken by all Christian scholars to be the first reference to Messiah, Jesus Christ, in the Bible. Christ had to be totally man as well as totally God. Had the human race been completely infected by fallen angelic nature, there would have been no place for Jesus Christ, the perfect man.

In descending to Tartarus (hell), Christ proclaimed total victory over Satan and his kingdom. “*When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him*” (Col. 2:15).

We dare not miss the longsuffering of God in 1 Peter 3:20 which says, “...when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark.” For 120 years while Noah built the ark he preached to men about their need of conversion

to Messiah, but men laughed about the judgment he said was coming. Noah had the last laugh when the judgment came and only he and seven of his family members were in the ark, safe from the destruction by water. God's next judgment on the world will be by fire (2 Pet. 3:10-12). He is still calling men to repent before the judgment comes. Don't laugh; now is the time to receive Christ, now is the day of your salvation.

VICTORIOUS OVER SIN AND JUDGMENT (3:20b-21)

“in which a few, that is eight persons, were brought safely through the water.”

Only the eight persons who truly responded to Messiah went into the ark, and God shut the door. The rest of mankind was destroyed by water. Though the storm beat upon the ark, it carried Noah and his wife and his three sons and their wives safely through the Flood, and when it came to rest on the mountain, they stepped out on dry land to a whole new world.

Some translations read, “were saved by water,” but the actual meaning is “brought safely through the water.”

“And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

The word “baptism” here does not refer to water baptism but to Holy Spirit baptism which puts one into spiritual union with Christ. *“For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13).*

What Peter is saying is that being placed into Christ now saves you and He makes it clear that he is not speaking about water baptism when he says, “...not the removal of dirt from the flesh.” Noah was saved by being in the ark, and Peter seems to be saying that when we exercise faith in Jesus Christ we are in Him and are safe. Through the baptism of the Holy Spirit we are united with Christ in His death, burial, resurrection and ascension where we are with Him spiritually in the heavenlies. Christ rose victorious over sin and judgment and hell. We too have victory over these things in Christ and we have a good conscience towards God.

VICTORIOUS OVER ALL ANGELIC REALMS (3:22)

“who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven.”

Jesus Christ died for sin and descended into hell, but he did not stay there. He rose from death and ascended bodily to the right hand of the Father in heaven. After His terrible suffering, He was exalted to the highest position, the Father's right hand. For Him there could be no glory without first suffering; the Cross came before the Crown.

The application is simple: We must suffer for Christ before we can be exalted. The reward for faithful suffering for Christians is glory, so we can be patient in our sufferings now.

“after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him”

Jesus is now enthroned at God’s right hand, the place of supreme privilege and sovereignty over the universe. All the heavenly beings, good and bad, are subject to His control. The suffering of Christians will ultimately bring us such glory too. *“Do you now know that we shall judge angels? How much more, matters of this life” (1 Cor. 6:3)?*

CONCLUSION

There are a number of spiritual lessons we can learn from this section of Scripture. First, Christ is our ark and if we are in Him no circumstances, not even a universal flood, can harm us. We are safe in Christ.

Second, we can only expect to be exalted after we have suffered, for suffering always precedes glory.

Third, beware of the schemes, ploys and plots of Satan and his demons, for he hates Christ and Christians, and he will do anything to destroy the life of a Christian or the life of a local church. When Satan attacks, the only safe place is the spiritual ark, Jesus Christ, where we are protected from the fiery darts of the evil one. Ephesians 6:12 says, *“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world-forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the-heavenly places.”*

Fourth, remember the age you live in, for the time just before Christ’s return will be like the days of Noah. Not only will men be materialistic, humanistic and indifferent to spiritual things, and involved in much sexual perversion, there will also be an increase in Satanic and demonic activity. Let us discern the times and realize that our Lord may be coming again soon. Even so come, Lord Jesus!

If you are not a Christian, remember judgment is coming and the only safe and secure place is in Christ. He died, rose, and ascended into heaven so that you might be saved and escape spiritual death and eternity in hell. When Noah stepped out of the ark after the Flood, he stepped into a whole new world. If you accept Christ by faith, you will be put into the spiritual ark, Christ, and you will step out of your old life into a whole new life. The Bible says, *“Therefore, if any man is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.”*