

## THE SPIRITS IN PRISON (What Does It Mean?)

<sup>18</sup> 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; <sup>19</sup> in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits *now* in prison, <sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> 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, <sup>22</sup> who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him. 1 Peter 3:18-22 (NASB95)

Verse 19 says that “in the spirit” Christ made proclamation to the spirits in prison who were once disobedient. Next (in verse 20) we see a statement that seems to connect “these” to something that happened in the time of Noah. I cannot remember ever having heard a sermon on this passage. Most people readily admit that they don’t have a clue as to what Peter was writing about. I’m not sure what we would do with the information if we knew what it meant, but we can briefly check out what some commentators have written on these verses.

You have probably heard that this is a description of what happened during the time between Jesus’ death on the cross and His resurrection. Some claim that He descended into Hell and delivered the gospel message to the Old Testament saints who were looking forward to the coming of the Savior but who died before that happened. Others claim that He went into the place they call Purgatory and gave those who were there a chance to be saved if they would believe. To say the least, this is reading a lot into the text that is not there and both options create a lot of “conflicts” with what is generally believed about Scriptural teaching on death and judgment. These speculations are somewhat influenced by erroneous doctrines held by the Roman Catholics for centuries.

Some of the comments in John Gill’s commentary point out that the text does support the idea that in His Spirit, Christ was working in and through the person of Noah during the time he was building the ark to proclaim God’s call to the people to trust and obey. Those who were disobedient to the “message proclaimed through Noah” perished in the flood and these are still (even now) “spirits in prison.” Those (few) who did believe the message were saved from the flood in the ark. How do we know that they believed? They got on the ark before the door was closed. In essence, this idea is the Christ (in spirit) descended to earth and proclaimed the message through Noah to those who were alive THEN but are NOW imprisoned in Sheol because they rejected His message and then died in the flood.

An interesting alternative interpretation by Michael Heiser is that Peter was making use of typology which typically is related to using an Old Testament story or event to foreshadow the future. Heiser calls this a non-verbal prophesy. The situation with this account in First Peter is that there is no direct mention of “spirits in prison” in the Old Testament. However, as many have noted, Peter (as well as Jude) does not limit his writing to Old Testament writing but also includes in information found in the books of Enoch. Most of what we know about Enoch was that “he walked with God.” The account (in Enoch) that some connect to what Peter wrote is related to the “watchers” who were being condemned in association with the Great Flood. The spirits of these watchers were confined to an area of the abode of the dead and were prevented from further activity among humanity. According to the account, these imprisoned watchers (spirits) were able to communicate with the spirit of Enoch (who found favor with God) and requested that Enoch intercede with God on their behalf to allow them to be freed from their imprisonment. God denied this request and Enoch (in spirit) descended into the depths of Sheol

to deliver (preach) the message that their request was denied and then Enoch left and returned to his eternal abode in the presence of God.

Peter is said to have used this account from Enoch as a typology of what Jesus did between death and resurrection. In a parallel way, Jesus descended into the abode of the dead in which the spirits of the watchers (not the spirits of regular humans who died in the flood) were being kept and told them that what the forces of evil had tried to accomplish in eliminating (canceling) Christ (by death on the Cross) did not work and they (the watchers in Sheol) were still not getting out of their prison – they were still doomed. Just as other New Testament writers used Adam as a “type” of Christ and concluded that Jesus is the Second Adam, some have noted that Christ is the Second Enoch. Additionally, just as Enoch left the abode of the dead (and the spirits of the watchers did not), Christ left the abode of the dead (was resurrected) and the spirits of the watchers remained).

In the midst of these various possibilities about what this means, there is an interpretation that aligns with what we know happened in the first century church as the gospel was taken to the Gentiles or those who had a heathen or pagan background. The same Spirit Who raised Christ from death was working in and through the early believers as they took the gospel message to people who were ignorant of God. It can be argued that these people were imprisoned in their paganism and ignorance. Of course, they could be classified as “sometime disobedient” in their past lives. In fact, Paul used this exact terminology in his letter to Titus. (For we ourselves were sometimes disobedient. Titus 3:3.) Just as God was patient with the people in Noah’s time while the Ark was being constructed, God showed similar patience and withheld judgment on these unbelievers while the fullness of His plan of salvation was being revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

In verse 21 we find what some would claim to be a “proof text” that you must be baptized to be saved. However, this verse is literally telling us that baptism is an image or a picture of the means of our salvation. It pictures the death, burial and resurrection of the Lord Jesus and in our “good conscious” acceptance and identification with Him in what is represented by this imagery we find our salvation.

Following Christ’s death, burial and resurrection, He now sits at the right hand of the Father and reigns in heaven. In like manner, we have this as our hope that in Christ we too shall enter into heaven and be seated with Christ and will reign with Him. This is the ultimate expression of victory that is ours in Christ.

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For additional information on Heiser’s take on this passage check out the following link:  
<https://nakedbiblepodcast.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/NB-08-Transcript.pdf>

A video presentation of the above podcast can be found at  
<https://www.google.com/search?q=michael+heisner+Christ+preached+to+spirit+in+prison&oq=michael+heisner+Christ+preached+to+spirit+in+prison&aqs=chrome..69i57j39l33j0j1&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:1c2f2939,vid:TU0n1aFyiC0>