

Text: 1 Pt 3.18-20

Tonight, we come to a most notorious text, one which eludes many, over which many debate, and some throw up their hands in defeat.

“Luther wrote, ‘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.’ [Luther, *Commentary on Peter & Jude*, 166.]”¹

Spurgeon: “This passage nobody understands, though some think they do.”²

So, let’s read our text:

1 Peter 3.18-20

With some trepidation we will work our way through and try to see what the Lord has for us here.

In the context, we are dealing with a section of assurances in the face of persecution for righteousness’ sake. We are called to see such suffering as a blessing (3.14) and to have confidence because of the Lord’s resurrection, which won the victory over such suffering (3.18).

“Peter here introduced more information about Jesus’ activity in His spirit (i.e., His resurrected sphere of life), in addition to what he said about His resurrection from the dead (v. 18)...”³

Key themes: suffering for righteousness sake, assurance, Christ’s resurrection, our hope.

Proposition: The Lord’s resurrection wins a creation-wide victory so that we may face suffering for righteousness’ sake with confidence and courage.

¹ Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, The New American Commentary, v. 37 (Nashville, Tenn: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 184.

² Charles H Spurgeon, *Spurgeon Commentary: 1 Peter*, ed. Elliot Ritzema and Jessi Strong, Spurgeon Commentary Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014), 1 Pt 3.19.

³ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), 1 Pt 3.19.

I. The parts of the passage that are clear

- A. The subject of verse 18 is the reconciliation of man with God when Jesus suffered unjustly
1. This is offered to give us confidence in facing unjust suffering also
 2. The instrument of reconciling us to God was Jesus “having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit” (18)
- B. The resurrected Christ “in which” made a proclamation (19)
1. “In which” refers back to “having died ... made alive,” esp. the “made alive” part
 2. The proclamation communicated something to “the spirits in prison” — whoever they are
- C. These spirits are connected somehow to the time of Noah
1. They were disobedient in the past
 2. The time of their disobedience was during the patience of God during the construction of the ark

The proclamation to the “spirits in prison” is for our encouragement: Christ’s announcement of victory means those who suffer for his name are already victorious.

II. The parts that are unclear [competing interpretations]

- Who in the world are the “spirits in prison”?
- When (and where) did this proclamation occur?

“It seems obvious that Peter expected to be understood when he wrote, ‘through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison.’ His purpose seems to have been to encourage his afflicted readers with evidence of the victory of the suffering Christ, but subsequent ages have been perplexed about his exact meaning.”⁴

⁴ D. Edmond Hiebert, *1 Peter* (Winona Lake, Ind.: BMH Books, 1997), 241.

A. The spirits in prison

1. Summary of the main interpretations (some slight variations on each theme exist)

a. The “spirits” are somehow connected to the sin mentioned in Gen 6.1-4

Gn 6.1-4 ¶ Now it came about, when men began to multiply on the face of the land, and daughters were born to them,² that the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful; and they took wives for themselves, whomever they chose.³ 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.”⁴ 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.

1) Often the explanation is that evil spirits (angels) cohabited with women

2) The view is old, going back to Jewish apocryphal writings and some in the early church

3) Main problem: Angels are spirits and Jesus said they “neither marry nor are given in marriage” (Mk 12.25, Mt 22.30)

b. The “spirits” are unbelievers of Noah’s day, now existing as spirits awaiting judgement

1) The “proclamation” happened through Noah as he was a preacher of righteousness (2 Pt 2.5)

2) Main problem: the text says “He went” to these spirits (19)

Yet if he already preached to them through Noah, he didn’t need to go anywhere

- 3) Taught by Augustine, widely in medieval church, many since Reformation, including numerous conservatives [like Constable]
 - c. The “spirits” are all those dead in sin to whom the gospel comes from the time of the apostles until now
 - 1) This makes the word “in prison” meaningless, really
 - 2) The participle “having gone” doesn’t communicate an ongoing proclamation (would need a present participle)
 - 3) And what in the world does the reference to Noah mean? And the disobedience in the past?
 - d. The “spirits” are the saints in Hades, who Christ went to between death and resurrection and led to heaven
 - 1) All the other views want to avoid this view at all costs
 - 2) The reference to “made alive in the spirit” refers to Christ’s state when the proclamation went out: this is the resurrection, not the pre-resurrection state
 - 3) And the saints in Hades (if there ever were such) are not “disobedient”
2. The preponderance of biblical evidence points to door #1: the spirits connected somehow to Gen 6

In my study, I was dragged kicking and screaming to this conclusion. (I wanted door #3.)

Schreiner: “the majority view among scholars today is that the text describes Christ’s proclamation of victory and judgment over the evil angels. ... The point of the passage, then, is not that Christ descended into hell but, as in 3:22, his victory over evil angelic powers.”⁵

⁵ Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 185.

a. First, consider 2 Pt 2.4-5 and Jude 6

2 Pt 2.4-5 ¶ For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment;⁵ 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;

Jude 1.6 And angels who did not keep their own domain, but abandoned their proper abode, He has kept in eternal bonds under darkness for the judgment of the great day,

- 1) Clearly, there are angels in pits, awaiting judgement
- 2) They are there because they “did not keep their own domain”
- 3) There is at least a juxtaposition with Noah in 2 Pt 2.4-5 (paralleling our passage)

b. Jewish apocryphal teaching, as found in the book of Enoch, taught that angels cohabited with women in Gen 6: Jude quotes Enoch:

Jude 1.14-15 *It was also about these men that Enoch, in the seventh generation from Adam, prophesied, saying, “Behold, the Lord came with many thousands of His holy ones,¹⁵ to execute judgment upon all, and to convict all the ungodly of all their ungodly deeds which they have done in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him.”*

- 1) Note, here Enoch, through Jude speaks of the judgement of men, not angels
- 2) Jude makes no comment affirming the idea of angels cohabiting with men

c. Now we must reckon with the “sons of God” and the “daughters of men” in Gen 6

1) Three views

a) Fallen angels

b) Mighty men, rulers

c) Line of Seth mixing with line of Cain

Most conservatives opt for door #3 here.

2) How can we fit this in with the “spirits” (angels) in 1 Pt 3?

a) We know that fallen angels are still abroad in the earth (accounts of demon possession in the Gospels and Acts)

b) We know that fallen angels can “possess” men and certainly use men to accomplish evil purpose

c) We know that Satan will animate the Beast and the False Prophet [both men] during the Tribulation (see Rev 13)

d) Thus, it is possible that the sin of Gen 6 involved mighty angels who led mankind into worse and worse sin especially just prior to the flood

e) These angels could be now in prison for their deeds

3) Consider Rev 9

Rev 9.1-3 ¶ Then the fifth angel sounded, and I saw a star from heaven which had fallen to the earth; and the key of the bottomless pit was given to him.² He opened the bottomless pit, and smoke went up out of the pit, like the smoke of a great furnace; and the sun and the air were darkened by the smoke of the pit.³ Then out of the smoke came locusts upon the earth, and power was given them, as the scorpions of the earth have power.

a) There are beings kept in a deep pit until a certain time

b) They are released to torment men (description is fantastic, largely symbolical), but...

Rev 9.11 They have as king over them, the angel of the abyss; his name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in the Greek he has the name Apollyon.

c) Their leader is an angel

So far, we are seeing these spirits in 1 Peter 3 as angels, imprisoned for a time at least, to whom the Lord proclaimed something.

B. The time of the proclamation

1. The timing must be after the resurrection, as we noted earlier
2. The proclamation is by Jesus “made alive in the Spirit” (18) “in which also He went and made proclamation” (19)
3. “In which” can refer to state, or “sphere of existence” — *i.e.* the resurrected state
4. “In which” could also refer to instrumentality: “by which” — in other words, the resurrection *is* the proclamation
5. The text doesn’t say, but there is communication in the spirit realm of which we are unaware

The fact that Jesus rose from the dead, overthrowing Satan’s greatest plot against him, could proclaim to the imprisoned spirits that their defeat is complete, certain, and unassailable.

III. The message for us

A. We are told to look at suffering for righteousness’ sake as a blessing (14)

B. Our focus is to

1. Not fear (14)
2. But sanctify Christ [make him Lord of our hearts] (15)
3. Being always ready to answer (15)
4. And keeping a good conscience (16)
5. Even when unjustly treated

C. Our reasons

1. It is better to suffer unjustly than justly (17)
2. And our Lord won the victory over unjust treatment through the resurrection, which proclaimed defeat to Satan and all his hosts (18-20)

Conclusion:

Proposition: The Lord's resurrection wins a creation-wide victory so that we may face suffering for righteousness' sake with confidence and courage.