

## Those Incarcerated Spirits – I Peter 3:18-22

### I. Introduction:

- A. **Where** would you **prefer to live**: on the planet **Mercury** or on whatever **Pluto** is being called today?
1. Astronomers tell us that the surface temperature of Mercury is **354 degrees** Fahrenheit.
    - a. I don't know if that is on our side of Mercury or on the Sun's side, but it doesn't really matter.
    - b. Ask your Thanksgiving turkey, if he thinks 354 degrees is a good temperature at which to live.
  2. Those same astronomers tell us that the surface of Pluto is a **minus 387 degrees** Fahrenheit.
  3. You would freeze into a solid lump on Pluto before you could suffocate in its oxygenless atmosphere.
  4. Obviously, the best place to live is somewhere in between those places and temperatures; like the earth.
- B. Peter mentions Christ's preaching to incarcerated spirits, but it is difficult to be sure what he is trying to tell us.
1. John Gill, as he often does, offers more than six possible explanations for Peter's words.
  2. The most simple is that Jesus arose from the grave and in the Spirit went to Hades to preach to the souls of those who had died during the days of Noah.
  3. You might compare that to the very hot surface of Mercury.
  4. Another interpretation gives rise to one of Roman Catholicism's doctrines.
    - a. Christ died and visited Purgatory to give the spirits there a second opportunity to be saved.
    - b. That is the Plutonian version. It is extremely cold and thoroughly unbiblical.
  5. I hope to show you that the truth resides on a very pleasant 72 degree planet somewhere in between.

### II. According to Peter, **WHAT** exactly was it that Christ did? **WHAT** did He do?

- A. **"He went and preached unto the spirits in prison."**
1. That is a pretty simple statement; in fact it is so simple that it doesn't tell us very much.
  2. It leaves us with a lot of unanswered questions.
  3. Without adding human opinions to the scripture, **what does** it **actually** say?
  4. Christ **preached** to spirits in prison.
    - a. **"Preached"** is the common, everyday word for the proclamation of God's word. It is used of the gospel.
    - b. Paul said, Timothy **"preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine."**
- B. Somehow Christ **preached** to those spirits in prison, **but** we are **not** told **what** was it that He preached.
1. Since Peter doesn't tell us, some commentators have decided to answer for him.
  2. And thus we sometimes hear that He preached the gospel so that those incarcerated spirits could be saved
    - a. During the life of Noah, people didn't want to repent and to be saved, but Christ gave them a second opportunity just after His death and resurrection.
    - b. This, of course, is absolute heresy. There is no second chance salvation for anyone.
    - c. Nothing in this verse says that Christ preached the **gospel** to those people, although He might have.
    - d. His sermons could have been from a hundred other subjects.
  3. About 3,000 years transpired between the flood and Calvary, but even a hundred times as many years would not transform that prison into some sort of place of spiritual purgation; Purgatory.
  4. Another question arises: why just the people of Noah's day? Why not include those of Abraham's time?
- C. On the other side of the coin, some say that Christ entered hell, or hades, only to declare what fools those people were for their unbelief.
1. By the way, the word **"disobedient"** in **verse 20** is twice as often translated **"unbelief."**
  2. The disobedience those people displayed was not to believe Noah and the message which God gave him.
  3. But think about it: did those people in prison need to be told of their serious situation?
    - a. Don't you think they had already reached the conclusion that they had made a horrible mistake after a few thousand years in torment?
    - b. They didn't need the Lord Jesus to come along and rub it in; throwing their foolishness into their faces.
  4. Jesus didn't do that, nor is this is talking about their final judgment. That is something yet to come.

- D. By the way some preachers slip away from these verses in Peter to say that Christ went Paradise to take the Old Testament saints with Him to His Father's house.
1. While that may or may not be true, it is certainly not Peter's subject here.
  2. What would Christ's preaching to those people have to do with His deliverance of righteous souls?
  3. The reference to the "*disobedience*" of those people permanently destroys that application to this scripture.

### III. That leads us to our next question: *WHERE* did Christ do this preaching?

- A. Did He mount some fireproof pulpit in Hell and begin preaching?
1. Does Peter use the word "*hell*" or "*hades*" or the Hebrew equivalent "*sheol*?"
  2. No he did not, but he certainly could have. He was not unfamiliar with those words.
  3. And he did in *II Peter 2:4*, where the word "*tartarus*" is translated "*hell*."
- B. Here Peter uses a common word which means "*prison*."
1. Forty out of fifty times, the Greek word is translated "*prison*," and the rest of the time it is a form of "*watch*."
  2. For example at Jesus' birth, "*there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night*." They had their sheep under protective custody.
  3. Peter doesn't say that these souls were in "*hell*." He says they were in "*prison*."
  4. However, I must point you to *Revelation 20:7* which says, "*and when the thousand years are expired, Satan shall be loosed out of his prison*."
  5. No matter where and what kind of incarceration Satan endured during that millennium, it was first and foremost a prison.
- C. I don't believe that I have scriptural authority to say that Christ went to hell to preach to these spirits.
1. If some other good brother wants to take that position and responsibility, I can't stop him.
  2. But I will try to remind him that Peter, even though he could have, doesn't use the word "*hell*."
- D. In a couple minutes we will address *when* Christ did this preaching and how, or *wherewith*, did He do it.

### IV. But first, let me ask: *WHERE* do we read this statement? *WHAT* is the context?

- A. I've mentioned several times that I have relatively few commentaries on Peter. Only between six or eight.
1. Usually, I consult them only when I have serious difficulties understanding the verse before me.
  2. I much prefer using my lexicon and concordance, comparing scripture with scripture, letting the Holy Spirit lead me.
  3. But with this difficult scripture, I pulled out and read every one of them.
  4. And something I noticed in all of them, without exception, was that they ignored the context.
  5. They examined *verses 19* and *20* as though they were *disconnected parentheses* or *footnotes*.
  6. They said nothing about *verse 18* – "*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*."
- B. Doesn't our text flow directly out of a declaration of Christ's substitutionary sacrifice for sins?
1. Peter had just mentioned being brought unto God through the death and resurrection of the Saviour.
  2. I wonder if some people take this preaching of Christ out of the context, because they don't want their explanation to be exposed by what Peter has just said.
  3. We need to remember that the subjects here are the gospel & the blessings which result from the gospel.

### V. With that I'll ask: *WHEREBY* or *WHEREWITH* did Christ preach to the spirits in prison?

- A. We are clearly told that it was in some way *through* the *Holy Spirit*.
1. "*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*."
  2. The word "*quickened*" in "*quickened by the Spirit*" speaks of Christ's resurrection – restoration to life.
  3. There are plenty of scriptures to authenticate that explanation.

4. **John 5:21** for example – *“For as the Father raiseth up the dead, and quickeneth them; even so the Son quickeneth whom he will.”*
5. And, *“If the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you” – Romans 8:11.*

- B. There are scriptures which tell us that **God, the Father, raised Christ** from the grave.
  1. But there are others which declare more specifically that He did it through the **power of His Spirit**, corroborating what Peter tells us.
  2. Again, *“If the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you. By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison.”*
  3. It was by the Spirit who raised Christ from the grave that Christ preached to the spirits in prison.
- C. Now ask yourself: why didn't Jesus go and do that personally or physically, since He had been resurrected?
  1. Why are we told that it was by the Holy Spirit that Christ preached to the people who lived in Noah's day?
  2. Before I try to answer that question, I want to add my final question:

#### VI. WHEN did Christ do this preaching to those souls which were then incarcerated?

- A. With this we begin to come to the interpretation which I think makes the most sense.
  1. And by the way, I am not the only one to reach this conclusion. Even some smart people say this.
- B. Notice the word *“sometime”* in **verse 20**.
  1. That Greek word is often translated *“in time past”* or *“aforetime,”* or *“once.”*
  2. It appears to me that the spirits to whom Christ preached were in prison when Peter was writing this letter.
  3. But their unbelieving disobedience was committed earlier, before they were incarcerated.
  4. The question is: when did Christ preach to them?
  5. Was it sometime between the crucifixion and when Peter picked up his Bic pen to write this epistle?
- C. Think about this: on those occasions in this auditorium, when hearts are stirred or when the lost are convicted of their sin, it is not through the eloquence or logic of the preacher.
  1. It is the ministry of the Holy Spirit to break through people's depravity and to bring dead souls to Christ.
  2. And this has been true of gospel preaching from the days of Enoch through to Peter & Paul & down to us.
  3. When Noah stood on the bow of the unfinished ark, telling his neighbors to repent and turn to the Lord, he was preaching in the power of the Holy Spirit – the Spirit of God – the Spirit of Christ.
  4. I believe **that** is what Peter is saying here.
  5. In the context of *“bringing us to God,”* Peter is saying that the Spirit of Christ preached the same kind of message to the disobedient and unbelieving people of Noah's day.
- D. Do I have any scriptural right to say that in some way Christ preached to those people? I believe I do.
  1. Turn to **Ephesians 2:13** – *“But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: And came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh.”*
  2. Who does Paul say came and preached peace to us?
  3. It was the One who made reconciliation with God possible by way of His own body on the cross.
  4. When God's messenger is enabled to touch the heart of a lost man, it is only through the Holy Spirit.
  5. And if that man rejects the truth of the gospel, eventually ending up in the Lake of Fire, it could be said of him that he rejected the ministry of Christ through His Spirit.

## VII. Conclusion:

- A. When did Christ do this preaching and by whom or whereby?
  1. It was in the days prior to the flood, through the Spirit of the Lord who empowered Noah in his preaching.
  2. Noah's message was essentially the same as ours: God's judgment is on its way, repent and be reconciled to the Lord before the death angel arrives.
  3. Sadly, only seven other souls believed Noah in that earlier day. Just as it is today: millions did not repent.
  4. So they drowned, or in some other violent fashioned, they died.
  5. Their souls – their dead spirits – were then committed to sheol, to hell, to prison, awaiting the day of their ultimate execution in the Lake of Fire.
  
- B. Is there any practical application to all this? I believe there is.
  1. We must saturate the gospel ministry with prayer for God's blessings.
  2. The preacher needs to be filled with the Holy Spirit in order to properly convey the gospel.
  3. And ultimately, it is only when God opens sinners' hearts and blesses them with faith that they will be saved.