

The only survivor of a shipwreck washed up on a small, uninhabited island. He prayed feverishly and passionately for God to rescue him, and every day he scanned the horizon for help, but help was nowhere to be found. Exhausted, he eventually managed to build a little hut out of driftwood to protect him from the elements, and to store his few possessions. But then one day, after scavenging for food, he returned to find his little hut in flames, the smoke rolling up to the sky. The worst had happened – he had lost everything. He was stung with grief and anger. “God, how could you do this to me!” he cried out.

Early the next day, he was awakened by the sound of a ship that was approaching the island. It had come to rescue him. “How did you know I was here?” asked the weary man, and his rescuers replied, “We saw your smoke signal.”

It is easy to get discouraged when things are going bad. But we shouldn't lose hope, because God is at work in our lives, even in the midst of trouble. So, remember the next time you are suffering and your little hut is burning to the ground – it just may be a smoke signal that summons the grace of God.

I like that little story – it's a picture of suffering that ultimately leads to salvation.

We have been in **1 Peter** for several months now, and the consistent theme in this letter has been suffering – the reality of it, the result of it, and the response to it.

Last week we talked about suffering for the sake of righteousness, for the Lord's sake, for His reputation, for His honor – suffering for doing what is right and good, and this morning we are going to see how the suffering of Christ ultimately leads to victory – His victory and ours.

Now before we get into our passage, I need to explain something. The passages we are going to look at are some of the most difficult passages in the entire Bible to understand – even for scholars who live and breathe the Bible, they are difficult, they have created a lot of good debate and – as you might imagine, there are a number of different interpretations for them – often times leaving readers with more questions than answers. So, before we move forward, I want to give you a few pointers for dealing with difficult passages.

- When we come to a passage that is hard to understand – we should use passages in the Bible that we do know on a particular subject to help us understand those we don't know. In other words, we should compare Scripture with Scripture, and ideally, allow the Bible to explain itself.

- Secondly, sometimes it's easy to miss the forest because of all the trees, meaning details are important, but we don't want to get so bogged down in all the details that we completely miss the main point – and it's so easy to do.
- As I have said on many occasions – context is very important. When considering a difficult passage, we need to see how it fits with the passages that surround it and with the Bible as a whole. Difficult passages need to be put in their proper context; otherwise, we will be following all sorts of rabbit trails.
- And lastly, as we have learned in our study through the book of Revelation, some things in the Bible are a complete mystery, and that's likely the way they will remain, and instead making wild guesses and filling in the blanks – sometimes the best thing to do is to accept it as a mystery and to admit we don't understand it and probably never will on this side of heaven.

These pointers will be useful for us this morning, so now that I have peaked your interest, let's carefully dig into our passage. Turn to **1 Peter 3**, and we will begin with **verse 18**, and fortunately for us, the first half of this verse is very clear.

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;

This is one of those passages, like **John 3:16**, that presents the entire Gospel in a nutshell. Here we presented with God's *purpose* for His Son – namely that Jesus **might bring us to God** – to bring us into a right relationship with His Father – to take us by the hand so to speak, and lead us to God. That was His *purpose*.

But this verse also tells us about our *problem* – our sin separated us from God and prevented us from entering into a relationship with Him, and not only that, there is a penalty for our sin – it's death. Someone has to die for sin – either the sinner or a substitute – but either way, the penalty for sin – death. There's no way around it, and that's our *problem*.

But thank God, He made *provision* for us – Jesus suffered and died in our place for our sin – He fulfilled His *purpose* and took on our *problem*. He suffered and died for our sin, as a substitute – the just for the unjust, the righteous for the unrighteous, the holy for the unholy, and it was once and for all. Unlike the Old Testament sacrificial system in which sacrifices had to be offered over and over again, the completed work of Christ on the cross was sufficient to cover the sins of all people for all time. It doesn't get any clearer than this. These are the truths of the Gospel – the good news given to a fallen and sinful and broken world, that

Jesus – the sinless One, died once and for all for those who are sinful. That’s the gospel, it’s simple, it’s supposed to be simple.

Then, we come to the second half of **verse 18** where Peter says referring to Jesus, **“having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit”** and this is where it gets a little more difficult to understand.

We know that Jesus was all God, but at the same time, He was all man, and just like us, Jesus had a physical body, and He had a human spirit – and, let’s not confuse His human spirit with the Holy Spirit. He had a human spirit just like us.

We understand that Jesus physically died on the cross – there was a time when His body ceased to live, but Peter also tells us that His human spirit was made alive, and that has created a lot of very good debate and numerous interpretations. **What did Peter mean when he said Jesus was “made alive in the spirit”?** Some say that to be **made alive in the spirit** implies that Jesus first had to die in the spirit, explaining that there was a moment on the cross where Jesus spiritually died and was separated from His Father as evidenced by His cry, **“My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”** But it’s also suggested there had to be another moment on the cross when His spirit was made alive again, because just before Jesus breathed His last breath and physically died, He said, **“Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit.”** I will admit this idea is intriguing and could be absolutely right, but it’s a little confusing.

Others suggest that being **made alive in the spirit** actually refers to the resurrection of Jesus, and that may very well be the case as Peter mentions the resurrection later in **verse 21**, but that’s confusing to me as well because it wasn’t His spirit that was resurrected – it was His body. So, again, there is some mystery here.

After exploring numerous resources and reading the insights of many other very smart people, it seems to me that when the physical body of Jesus died, His spirit was released from His body – it was disembodied, it was no longer confined to His flesh, it became free and was **made alive** in the spiritual world. **Does that make sense?** I’m not trying to force that view on anyone – you can certainly agree or disagree, but I think it is the most accurate and the easiest explanation to give.

So, after Jesus physically died, His body was then taken down from the cross and it was buried in a tomb, but His spirit had somewhere else to go. Apparently, Jesus had another appointment and that brings us **verses 19-20**.

¹⁹ in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison,
²⁰ 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.

Okay, we have come to what many Bible scholars believe to be the most difficult passage in all of God's Word to understand. I learned there are some 18 theories to explain this passage, but I have no intention of torturing you with all of these theories beyond my normal Sunday morning torture of you, so I'm just going to share what I understand this passage to say to the best of my ability.

In this passage, I believe we are dealing with the time period between the crucifixion of Jesus and His resurrection, or to say it differently in the form of a question – If Jesus was crucified on Friday and He was resurrected on Sunday, **what happened on Saturday?** I believe that's the time frame we are talking about here.

Now before we press on, I want to say that Jesus did some things after He died that we will not do, and Jesus went to places after He died where we will not go. As believers, there is already a place for us – our destination is already set, our heavenly inheritance is already waiting, so let's not confuse the activities of Jesus in this passage with our own. Okay, let's press on.

We are told that Jesus **went**, obviously in His spirit, to make a **proclamation** to the **spirits** held in **prison** who were once **disobedient** in the **days of Noah**. Well, I don't know about you, but this prompts a few questions for me: **Who were these spirits, where are they being detained, and what did Jesus proclaim to them?**

So, let's start with – **Who are these spirits?** Well right off the bat, since this is a prison being mentioned, and Peter tells us these are spirits **who were disobedient** – we can conclude that these are wicked spirits being detained, but not only that, they were also present in the **days of Noah**. That's really specific and it narrows down our focus quite a bit. **So, who were they?** I'm not entirely sure, it's still somewhat mysterious, but I think they were fallen angels – they were demons, and let me explain.

We all know that in the days of Noah there was extreme wickedness in the world – so extreme, that it prompted the flood mentioned in **Genesis 7**, wiping out all of mankind except for Noah and his family, and it's clear from the accounts in **Genesis**, namely **Genesis 6**, that much of this wickedness at the time involved the

activities of fallen angels – demonic spirits who either took on human form or they possessed men who had sexual relations with women.

Presumably, these fallen angels sought to pollute the entire human gene pool by blending demonic and human lines – so God flooded the entire earth to destroy the perverted and vile inhabitants, and He imprisoned these wicked fallen angels who crossed the line with humanity. We are told in **Jude verse 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.

So, I believe these are fallen angels – demons who are imprisoned, and that leads us to our second question: **Where are they being imprisoned?** Well, that depends on who you talk to and what you read. Some will tell you it's Hell – these spirits are in Hell – the final place of eternal fire and brimstone, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Some suggest this prison is in Hades – which is the realm of the unbelieving dead, a temporary place where the unrighteous await their judgment. The Catholics might say it's Purgatory – which I don't believe there is such a place. In Peter's second letter, he mentions these fallen angels being detained in Hell, but he uses the word *Tartarus* which was a word from pagan Greek mythology to describe the subterranean abyss where rebellious gods were punished, and it seems the word was taken over into Judaism and it was used to refer to the underworld prison of demons. Being cautious here, this prison mentioned by Peter may be a special part of Hell or Hades where these demons were being detained awaiting their final judgment.

So, after His physical death, in His spirit, Jesus went to this place of imprisonment in the underworld to make a proclamation to these demons. **And what was His proclamation?** Jesus declared His victory over sin, and hell, over Satan and his demons, and even over death itself.

John MacArthur says, *“As the demons were celebrating the fact that Jesus was dead, Jesus showed up among them and crashed their party. In the midst of them, He declared His triumph of evil and His victory over death.”*

From the very moment they rebelled against God, Satan and his demons had been seeking to destroy the work of Jesus any way they could. And as Jesus hung there on the cross, bearing the sins of all mankind, and His physical life was taken from Him, it appeared that they had succeeded, they thought they had finally got Him,

but in His spirit, Jesus goes to these imprisoned demons and proclaims that He has won. In spite of the suffering that Jesus endured, in spite of the ridicule, in spite of the persecution against Him – He was victorious and they were doomed.

In a similar way, Noah and his family suffered hardship and endured the ridicule and the persecution from the wicked people around them as they built the ark – but in spite of it, they pressed on in obedience to God, and in the end, they were saved through the flood – they were victorious while all others were doomed. Then Peter says in **verses 21-22**,

²¹ 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, ²² who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him.

So, here is another very difficult passage. I suspect that for some, you keyed in right on those words “**baptism now saves you**” and you may be assuming that Peter is referring to water baptism – but we know that water baptism does not save us and to suggest otherwise would be inconsistent with God’s Word. The Bible is abundantly clear that we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone. If you recall in our study through Galatians, the Judaizers preached that you needed Jesus *plus* the law, specifically circumcision, in order to be a true child of God, but the Bible is overwhelmingly clear that Jesus *plus* anything else, to include water baptism, suggests the finished work of Christ was not enough to save us.

Only Jesus saves, and you can be dipped in water over and over again to the point of becoming wrinkled like a prune – but it won’t save you. Water baptism is a picture of the believer’s salvation experience, it’s an act of obedience that should be followed, it’s an ordinance of the church, but it will not save you. Peter knew this, **so then what is he talking about?**

I told you at the beginning of my message that context is very important, and we see that Peter provided some context for us – that being what he just said about the **days of Noah** where eight people were brought safely **through the water**. That’s the context we have to use here – and what Peter is saying, in a sense, is that this baptism, whatever it might be, corresponds to the experience of Noah and his family – this baptism is a copy, a figure, a resemblance, a pattern of what happened in the **days of Noah** – so let’s flush out this idea for moment to see if we can determine what Peter is talking about.

When we think of the flood water, we naturally think of it as being destructive, and it was. It destroyed the entire sinful human race. The flood water brought death and it did not save anyone. Noah and his family were not saved *by the water*, rather, they were saved **through the water** as Peter said, because Noah and his family were placed securely in the ark. While in the ark, the waters of judgment burst up from the earth, the waters of judgment rained down from the sky, the waters of judgment surrounded them from all sides – yet they were protected from the waters of judgment in the ark.

Since baptism means *immersion*, if anyone was immersed in water – it was the unrighteous people on the earth, not Noah and his family – they stayed dry because they were in the ark, and for the sake of good debate, if the flood water did anything for Noah and his family, it simply lifted the ark. The early church saw the ark as a picture of salvation and understood that Noah and his family were saved **through the water** by placing their faith in God’s provision of an ark – the same way we are saved by placing our faith in God’s provision of Jesus Christ – who we could also describe as the Ark of our salvation.

So, Noah and his family were not saved by the water – they were saved because they had enough faith to build and enter the ark. We are not saved by the water any more than Noah was saved by the water. Noah and his family were saved by faith, just like us. It’s not an outward ceremony of water baptism that saves us or washes away sin. We may cleanse the outside, but much more is needed in order to be saved. Ironically, water baptism is actually a picture of the baptism that Peter is really talking about. Peter has already mentioned the death of Christ and now he brings up the resurrection of Christ, so now we know that the baptism Peter is talking about is our spiritual baptism where we are immersed in Christ and share His benefits. Paul tells us in **Romans 5:8-10**,

⁸ But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. ⁹ Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. ¹⁰ For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.

Like Noah, who entered the ark by faith and was saved from God’s judgment – so we by faith are immersed in Christ, baptized in the Holy Spirit at the moment of salvation, cleansed of our sin, declared righteous in Christ, and made right with God because of the death and resurrection of Jesus. And we can now stand before God with a **good conscience** because of the finished final work of Christ.

So, Peter's reference to Noah, and to baptism and to a good conscience is to encourage his readers about who they were in Christ – that is they were “safe in the ark” so to speak, no matter what suffering and persecution might come their way.

And to show the completeness of this victory over their present sufferings, Peter teaches that after His suffering and death, Jesus ascended to the right hand of the Father and now all powers, including fallen angels, were subject to Him. Jesus triumphed over evil in every way, and what Peter was saying to his readers and us was this:

“Although you suffer now, just like Noah did, and just like Jesus did, you are on the winning team. You will be victorious. Your suffering ends in salvation.”

Source Material:

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