

In I Peter 2:12 God told us to keep our behavior excellent among the Gentiles so that we will glorify Him as they observe our good deeds. In 2:13-3:12, He has instructed us about what good behavior should look like in relation to authorities. We are to submit to all in authority, even to “those who are unreasonable,” (2:18). We are to bear up “under sorrows when suffering unjustly” (2:19), and are to endure when we suffer for doing what is right (2:20). Wives were reminded to submit to husbands even when they are disobedient to the Word (3:1). Now, Peter concludes in 3:17 that it is better (if God should will it) to suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong.

At the time I Peter was written, it was still early in Nero’s reign when things were relatively calm (see notes on 2:11-17). Christians were persecuted, but not just because they were Christians; they were persecuted because they were a new religious group. “Worshipping a man who had been executed as a criminal but was reported to be alive may have seemed absurd to most, but even such an absurd belief might have been tolerated as long as its adherents continued to function as good citizens and members of society” (Jobes, 227).

<sup>13</sup> ***Who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good?***

<sup>14</sup> ***But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. AND DO NOT FEAR THEIR INTIMIDATION, AND DO NOT BE TROUBLED,***

<sup>15</sup> ***but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence;***

<sup>16</sup> ***and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame.***

<sup>17</sup> ***For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong.***

When people threaten us it is easy to be intimidated or fear them in order to avoid persecution. But we are to sanctify Christ as Lord, to set Him apart from all others. This means we are to stand in awe of his lordship over all creation, and to bow before His sovereign rule. The way we sanctify Christ is by “always *being* ready to make a defense to everyone who asks us to give an account for the hope that is in us.” This is not a command to formally study Christian apologetics, but to tell of the hope we have that is based on the gospel.

We should present this hope with gentleness, and with reverence toward the other person. If people are offended, it should be because they are offended by the content of the gospel, not by us. Verse 16 also points out that our testimony includes having a clear conscience before God. We cannot explain that we have a hope when we live in ways that contradict what we are saying. The reason for this is so that “those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame.”

God wills that we do right, but He knows that by doing so there will be times evil men will respond with hostility. God is not the source of evil, but He certainly controls it. If we suffer, it is not by the will of our adversaries, but by the will of our Father. Christians are to follow Christ who did not avoid suffering for living righteously.

**<sup>18(a)</sup> For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God,**

The “for” at the beginning of verse 18 shows that he is explaining why “it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong” (vv 13-17). In other words, verses 18-22 are to illustrate that though Christ suffered for living a righteous life, He found favor with God, was exonerated by the resurrection, and achieved authority over “angels, authorities, and powers” (3:22). Knowing this should encourage us to persevere in our own sufferings and to have hope in our triumph in Christ.

Verse 18 tells us of the nature of Christ’s suffering; “Christ died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God.”

- The fact that Jesus died “once for all” demonstrates that, in contrast to the sin offering that was offered yearly on the Day of Atonement for the sins of Israel (Heb. 9:24-28; 10:12), Jesus’ death was completely sufficient for the sins of the entire human race. No other sacrifice needed to be made.
- “The just for the unjust” tell us of the character of the Sufferer as well as those who benefit from His sacrificial death. The two terms contrast the moral character of each party; “a righteous One in place of unrighteous ones.”

“Christ’s character as “just” (or, righteous) fully qualifies Him to deal with sin in acting as the substitute for those who fail to conform to the divine standard of right. The one Man, whose perfect righteousness meant that He never deserved to die, endured the pains of death on behalf of those who deserved to die.” (Hiebert; *The Suffering and Triumphant Christ: An Exposition of 1 Peter 3:18-22* Bibliotheca Sacra 139 (1982) 146-158)

- The purpose behind Christ’s action is so that “He might bring us to God.”

“The statement assumes the fact of mankind's estrangement from God because of sin. But through Christ's atoning death, sin-estranged humans may be restored to fellowship with "God", the true God whom believers now know personally.” (Hiebert)

**<sup>18(b)</sup> 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,**

Verses 18b-21 form one of the most obscure passages in the NT. From the earliest days of the church, these verses have been surrounded with controversy and debate. One commentator has calculated that when taking into account all the possibilities, there could be potentially 180 different interpretations, in theory (Jobes, 239). The main difficulties center on verses 19-21.

There are three major questions that arise from this passage (from Grudem, I Peter, 212 ff):

1. Who are the spirits in prison?

- Are they the spirits of unbelievers who have died?
- Are they the spirits of OT believers who have died?
- Are they fallen angels?

2. What did Christ preach?

- Did He preach a second chance to repent?
- Did He proclaim the completion of His redemptive work?
- Did He preach the finality of condemnation to the unbelieving?

3. When did He preach?

- Did He preach in the days of Noah before He took on human form?
- Did He preach between His death and resurrection?
- Did He preach after His resurrection?

Grudem in his commentary on I Peter (pp 212-213) lists the five most commonly held views of these verses. The italicized words indicate the identity of 'the spirits in prison' in each view.

**VIEW 1:** When Noah was building the ark, Christ 'in spirit' was in Noah preaching repentance and righteousness through him to *unbelievers who were on the earth then* but are now 'spirits in prison' (people in hell).

This view is tied to 1 Pet 1:10-12: "As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful searches and inquiries, seeking to know what person or time *the Spirit of Christ within them* was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves, but you, in these things which now have been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven---"

According to this verse the spirit of Christ testified through the prophets. In the period just before the flood, Noah, the preacher of righteousness (2 Pet 2:5) was one through whom Christ testified.

**VIEW 2:** After Christ died, He went and preached to *the people in hell*, offering them a second chance of salvation.

**VIEW 3:** After Christ died, He went and preached to *the people in hell*, proclaiming to them that He had triumphed over them and confirmed the finality of their doom.

**VIEW 4:** After Christ died, He proclaimed release to *people who had repented just before they died in the flood*, and led them out of their imprisonment (purgatory) into heaven. (This view is common among Roman Catholic interpreters)

**VIEW 5:** After Christ died (or; after he rose but before He ascended into heaven) he traveled to hell and proclaimed triumph over the *fallen angels* who had rebelled in the days of Noah.

I personally think VIEW 5 is the best; namely, after Christ died and rose from the dead (but before He ascended into heaven), He traveled to hell and proclaimed a message declaring His triumph to the fallen angels.

My reasons for this are as follows:

**1. “having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit” most likely refers to Jesus’ death and resurrection as well as the movement from and His state of humiliation in the realm of “flesh” to a position of sovereignty and power in the realm of “spirit.”**

A. “having been put to death in the flesh” and “made alive in the spirit” form two balanced phrases that state the result of Christ’s suffering. As Hiebert comments, “The Greek construction is identical in each phrase, indicating intended balance and correspondence between them. “

There is no question that ‘having been put to death in the flesh’ “declares the violent death of Jesus, terminating His life as a man here on earth” (Hiebert), but what does “made alive in the spirit” mean?

VIEW 1. Does it refer to His resurrection?

VIEW 2. Is this talking about two realms of existence? Jesus was made alive in the realm of the spirit.

VIEW 3. Does this mean that Jesus’ body (His flesh) died and the immaterial part of Jesus (His soul) was set free from the limitations of His body?

I believe the combined VIEWS of 1 and 2 are probably correct.

- “Made alive” is commonly used of bodily resurrection or the giving of spiritual life.

The verb “made alive” is used in ten other places in the New Testament and either refers to the resurrection of the dead (John 5:21 [twice]; Rom. 5:17; 8:11; 1 Cor. 15:22, 36, 45) or denotes the giving of spiritual life (John 6:63; 2 Cor. 3:6; Gal. 3:21). It clearly means to give life where before it had ceased to be or where it had never been. In

Romans 8:11 it is used synonymously with "raise up" and asserts resurrection. Christ's redemptive victory was not complete until His resurrection. (Hiebert)

- Normally, in Greek, the opposite of body is soul (ψυχή) not spirit (πνεῦμα Jobes, 241).
- The terms "spirit" and "flesh" are used elsewhere to refer to the realm of the spirit and the realm of the flesh. As Grudem says, "the contrast is between physical, visible things which belong to this present world and invisible things which can exist in the unseen 'spiritual' world of heaven and the age to come" (163; cf I Pet. 4:6; Matt. 26:41; Mk. 14:38; Jn. 3:6; Rom. 8:4-6; I Tim. 3:16; etc. for similar usage of these terms).
- In this view "put to death" and "made alive" form appropriate opposites. Resurrection is the most natural opposite to death and would appear to make a better correspondence to the parallel grammatical construction. "Made alive in the spirit" declares the glorious antithesis to "put to death in the flesh." God acted to bring Christ to life again (cf. Rom. 8:11; 1 Pet. 1:21).

If "made alive" refers to Christ's resurrection, wouldn't "in the spirit" mean that Christ didn't rise bodily, but as a spirit?

If "spirit" were referring to the immaterial part of Christ, one would have difficulty explaining in what sense His spirit was "made alive" since the spirit never ceases to exist. The phrase "made alive in the spirit" does not refer to Christ's disembodied spirit but to His quickening in resurrection as the glorified Lord."(Hiebert --- note the two datives "in flesh" (σάρκι) and "in spirit" (πνεύματι) would thus be datives of reference = "In reference to the flesh, in reference to the spirit"). In other words, the flesh/spirit contrast is not between Christ's body and soul but between two states of existence; the "flesh" is His body, but also refers to the realm of earthly, human life before His death. His body was raised in a new dimension – in the realm of the spirit (Jobes, 239). The two ideas refer to the one redemptive act that includes Christ's death and resurrection, but also represent two spheres of existence (Jobes, 241)

The following explains this further:

"Readers of the NT have been puzzled at times by statements that seem to indicate that our Lord has become something that He already had been before. For example, in Matt 28:18, Jesus says: "All power has been given unto me in heaven and on earth." The reader asks, "Did He not have all power previously?" In Acts 2:36, Peter says: "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly *that God has made that same Jesus* whom you have crucified *both Lord and Christ.*" One inquires, "Was not Jesus both Lord and Christ already?" Other verses raise similar questions. The answer to these questions will be found in a right understanding of 1 Pet 3:18." (Skilton, A Glance At Some Old Problems In First Peter, WTJ 58 (1996) 1-9)

These verses can be explained if we understand that there are two successive stages in the Lord's Messianic work. The first stage was that of His humiliation where He functioned in the realm of an earthly, human life; a life beset with weakness, suffering, and even death (I Cor. 15:41-53). The second

stage, introduced by the resurrection, was one in which Christ was instated in a position of sovereignty and invested with power. At His resurrection Jesus entered the spiritual realm that is lasting, permanent, eternal. This “second stage” was “an event which in respect of investiture with power surpassed everything that could previously be ascribed to him in his incarnate state” (Murray).

A similar idea is found in Romans 1:3 and 4. There it says, “concerning His Son, who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh, who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness.”

“What Paul is claiming is that the preexistent Son, who entered human experience as the promised Messiah (according to the flesh), was appointed on the basis of (or, perhaps at the time of) the resurrection to a new and more powerful position in relation to the world” (Moo, Romans, 48, 49). Christ was “. . . exalted and now reigns at God’s right hand as king. This appointment as God’s Son in power expresses the same idea found in Acts 2:36, where God exalted Jesus as Lord and Christ at the resurrection” (Schreiner, New Testament Theology, 321, 322).

Thus, it is very probable that the ‘spirit’ in 1 Pet 3:18 refers not only to the resurrection, but also to the state of power that followed it (Skilton, A Glance At Some Old Problems In First Peter, WTJ 58 (1996) 1-9).

Therefore, “‘By flesh is meant Christ in His human sphere of existence, considered as a man among men. By spirit is meant Christ in His heavenly, spiritual sphere of existence, considered as divine spirit; and this does not exclude His bodily nature, since as risen from the dead it is glorified.’ The contrast is between Christ’s death as a real man here on earth and His risen life as the glorified Lord” (Grudem, 164). This contrast also “fits in the whole letter’s emphasis on the relative unimportance of temporary suffering in this world compared the enjoying of an eternal inheritance in the next. Our Lord willingly suffered physical harm, even death, for the sake of eternal, spiritual gain – the he might bring us to God. Peter’s readers should not therefore be surprised to find themselves ‘following in His steps’” (Grudem, 164).

## **2. Being made alive in the spirit, Christ made proclamation to the spirits in prison. These spirits are described as those who were once disobedient in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark.**

**A. "Made proclamation"** (ἐκήρυξεν) is a crucial term to interpret. This familiar verb, means "to announce, to proclaim aloud" as a herald, to make a public proclamation. The content of the proclamation must be indicated by the context. In the majority of its New Testament occurrences, it refers to the preaching of the gospel. But the New Testament does use this verb in a neutral sense (Luke 12:3; Rev. 5:2). The Septuagint (the Greek translation of the OT) , with which Peter certainly was familiar, uses the verb to refer to bringing bad news as well as good news (Jon. 1:2; 3:2, 4).

*A neutral meaning fits Peter's purpose to boost the morale of his afflicted readers. If Christ preached the gospel to these imprisoned spirits it is hard to see how this provides any comfort. However, if this was His announcement of His triumph over evil, it would be bad news for those in prison, but for Peter's readers it meant comfort and encouragement (i.e. this fits the purpose of the context really well).*

**B. The proclamation was made to the spirits now in prison.**

Are these the spirits of departed believers (Lk. 16:23-24; 2 Pet. 2:9), departed unbelievers (Lk. 16:22-24 – Grudem, 167), or fallen angels (2 Pet. 2:4)?

I think the view that these are fallen angels is best for the following reasons:

- The **plural** "spirits" in the Gospels frequently refers to unclean spirits (Mark 1:23, 26, 27; 3:11; 5:2, 8; etc.) The only clear instance in the New Testament where "spirits" is used of the surviving part of man after death is in Hebrews 12:23, but we know this is the immaterial part of man by the addition "of righteous men made perfect." Proponents of the view that these are demonic spirits refer to 2 Peter 2:4-5 and Jude 6 as evidence that this view was known and accepted in the early Christian church.
- Peter links the time to the days of Noah before the Flood. These spirits are characterized in verse 20 as those "who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark." . . . their disobedience took place prior to their imprisonment and Christ's announcement to them. If the identification of these "spirits" as angels is correct, then the reference is to the angelic transgression of God's command (Jude 6-7; "sons of God" in Gen. 6?). For those who want to see a second chance to be saved in these verses it should be noticed that the proclamation is specifically limited to the "spirits who were disobedient in the days of Noah." If it was a second chance, it isn't given to everyone.
- If these "spirits in prison" are to be equated with the angels that sinned in 2 Peter 2:4-5, when Christ "went" to make proclamation, He went downward, to Tartarus, which in Greek thought and in Jewish apocalyptic literature was viewed as a place of punishment lower than Hades. Angelic transgression was always viewed as having taken place just prior to the Flood.(Hiebert)

***Summary/Conclusion:***

It is impossible to know with absolute certainty which view is correct, though I lean toward view 5. The flesh/spirit contrast is not between Christ's body and His soul, but is primarily a contrast of two states of existence. Christ died on the cross and His existence in the realm His earthly, human life (life in "the flesh") ended. He rose from the dead, and was made alive in the realm of the spirit: that glorified state of existence that follows death. Therefore, this does not mean that Jesus' spirit died and was made alive, but that He was resurrected into a new state of existence, the spirit.

I can't think of any reason why spirits of disobedient men in Noah's day would be singled out from the rest of disobedient humanity to have a message proclaimed to them. Therefore, I would lean toward the view that the proclamation was to fallen angels, spirits who are referred to in Jude 6 as "angels who did not keep their own domain, but abandoned their proper abode, kept in eternal bonds under darkness for the judgment of the great day." If this is the case, Christ would be proclaiming His victory over these Satanic hoards and the pronouncement of future judgment. In Colossians it tells us that at the cross Jesus "disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him" (Colossians 2:15). Could this be the same event?

To summarize the successive stages of Jesus' messianic work:

Stage 1: Jesus in the flesh

- Jesus humbled Himself by taking on the form of man.
- Jesus **died** on the cross (I Pet. 3:18); His body was laid in the tomb.
- His spirit joined the saints who had died before Him.

Stage 2: Jesus in the spirit

- God did not abandon His body in the grave (Acts 2:31), but raised Him from the dead (Acts 2:32), giving Him a **new existence** in the realm of the spirit (I Pet. 3:18).
- Prior to His ascension **He went** and proclaimed His victory over death to the demonic hoard who have already been imprisoned (I Pet. 3:19), and by conquering death made a public display of the forces of wickedness (Col. 2:15).
- He then ascended into heaven (Acts 1:9).
- He is now in a position of glory and authority.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ vindicated Him – it proved that His righteous suffering was not in vain, nor was it a result of personal sin. He is now seated at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven.

In Ephesians 1:20-22, it is said, God raised Christ from the dead “and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come; and hath put all things under his feet.” This latter passage, taken from the eighth Psalm, is repeatedly quoted to prove the absolutely universal dominion of the risen Savior, as in Hebrews 2: 8: “In that he put all in subjection under him, he left nothing that is not put under him.” And also 1 Corinthians 15: 27, when it is said, “All things are put in subjection,” it is evident that He who put all things in subjection to Him is excepted.” No creature therefore is excepted. This also is what our Lord Himself teaches. When He says, “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.” (Matt. 28: 18.) Heaven and earth in Scriptural language, is the whole universe. In 1 Peter 3:22, it is said, “Who is gone into heaven, and is on the right hand of God; angels and authorities and powers (i.e., all rational creatures) being made subject unto him.” . . . That such authority and power could not be entrusted to a mere creature is plain from the nature of the case. Divine perfections, omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence, as well as infinite wisdom and goodness, are requisite for the effectual and righteous administration of a dominion embracing all orders of beings, all creatures rational and irrational, extending over the reason and conscience as well as over the external world. On this point the Scriptures are explicit. They teach expressly that to no angel, i.e., to no rational creature, as the term angel includes all intelligences higher than man, hath God ever said, “Sit on my right hand.” (Heb 1:13) All angels, all rational creatures, are commanded to worship Him. (Hodge, Systematic Theology , 636)

Jobes points out the redemptive elements that frame this passage (pp. 256-257):

- 3:18 Christ suffered once for sins  
The righteous on behalf of the unrighteous  
So that He might bring you to God  
Christ was put to death in the flesh  
He was made alive in the spirit
- 3:19 He went and preached to spirits
- 3:22 he went into heaven  
Angels and authorities and powers are subject to Him

I Timothy 3:16 is similar:

- He appeared in the body  
Was vindicated in the spirit
- Was seen by angels  
Was preached among the nations
- Was believed on in the world  
Was taken up into glory

**NOTE:** Some believe that this descent to hell was for Christ to bear the punishment of our sins. For example, Fred Price writes, "Do you think that the punishment for our sin was to die on a cross? If that were the case, the two thieves could have paid our price. No, the punishment was to go into hell itself and to serve time in hell separated from God"(Frederick K. C. Price, Ever Increasing Faith Messenger, June 1990, p. 7).

Of course, anyone who has studied the Bible knows that this is an absurd comment for numerous reasons.

First, if the above interpretation of I Peter 3:18-20 is correct, then these verses don't support the idea that Jesus went to hell and made this proclamation in the time period between His death and resurrection; rather, His proclamation was sometime after He was made alive (resurrected). Look at the time reference in I Peter 3: He "was made alive in the spirit (He was resurrected in the realm of the spirit) in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison." It was in the resurrected state that He went to make proclamation, not before it.

The time of Jesus' descent to make a proclamation to the spirits in prison is not mentioned elsewhere in Scripture and is not certain. It could have been immediately after His resurrection, before His appearances to His followers in Jerusalem. I see this as more likely, since the resurrection was the evidence of Jesus' full exoneration by God.

Secondly, when we read the Bible we find that it repeatedly says that Jesus died on the cross for our sins (see, I Pet 2:24; I Cor. 15:3), but makes no mention of a descent to hell to finish the work of salvation.

Romans 3:25 states that Christ's death on the cross was a "propitiation in His blood" (cf. I Jn. 2:2) and that *His death on the cross* demonstrated the righteousness of God. A propitiation is "a compensatory payment, by which the anger against the one who has been injured (God) is soothed" (Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 146). In other words, the death of Christ was a sacrificial act that made God propitious (favorable) toward the sinner. When the wrath of God for our sins was poured out upon Christ at the cross, it was averted from us (see Morris, 184-202 for a detailed discussion). If sin was propitiated at the cross, and Jesus' death there was the demonstration of God's righteousness, why would anything more be necessary? That the sufferings of Christ ceased the moment He expired on the cross, is plain from John 19:30 when Jesus said "it is finished" and gave up His spirit; what else could this mean than His work was completed before He died there?

Lastly, we can say "Jesus went to hell" if we mean one of two things: (1) He went there as the exalted Christ to proclaim His victory over death to the spirits there, or, (2) by "hell" we mean "Hades" and understand that "Hades" (Sheol in Hebrew) simply refers to the underworld, the realm of the dead, the grave (Gen. 42:38). What we should **not** mean is that He went to a place of torment to suffer for the sins of men.

Etymologically, Hades means the "unseen" (land) the "invisible" (world) and is conceived of as being far under the ground (Job 11:8; Psa. 139:8; Amos 9:2). It can be described as a place of torment (Matt. 5:22; Lk. 16:23) or simply refer to the state of death without any negative connotations (Rev. 1:18). Prior to the resurrection, both believers and unbelievers went to Hades (i.e. the grave; I Sam. 2:6; Psa. 89:48; Lk 16:19-31). Acts 2:25-31 speaks of the descent of King David's soul to Hades ("hell") and contrasts it to Christ's descent there (cf. Eph 4:9-10). However, the contrast lies in the fact that the body of God's Holy One (Jesus) did not see decay while David's body did - not in the location of their souls. Jacob, another believer, expected to meet his son Joseph in Sheol (Gen. 37:35). Hezekiah also looked at death as entering the gates of Sheol (Isa. 38:10). See Ps. 9:17; 49:14; Isa. 5:14 for the unbeliever.

So where did the spirit (the soul) of Christ go when His body was in the tomb?

I Peter 3:18-22 doesn't specify where Jesus' soul went when His body lay in the tomb. It only speaks of His death and the resurrection life that followed. However, we might guess that "What happens to ordinary men happened to Christ when He died. His cold and lifeless body was laid in the tomb. His human soul passed into the invisible world. . . . This is all that the passage in question [I Pet. 3:18-20] clearly teaches. (Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, II, 737).