

Text: 1 Peter 3:18-20

Title: The Death of Christ and His Preaching

Truth: Jesus proclaimed victory over sin to those gone before—and to us.

Date/Location: Good Friday April 15, 2022 at FBC

Introduction

1 Peter 3:18-20 For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit,¹⁹ by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison,²⁰ who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while *the* ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water.

I. The Death of Christ for Sinners, v. 18

- A. Who suffered? The just Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God, God the Son, the perfect God-man, the sinless Lamb, the good teacher.
- B. What does this suffering mean? It meant physical agony and spiritual darkness. This was symbolized by the atmospheric darkness that afternoon (Matt. 27:45; see Exodus 10:22).
- C. When did He suffer? I'm not talking about a calendar date, although it was one Friday around 30 A.D. The point is this: he suffered **once**. There is only one offering for sin forever. He suffered one time for all of time and for the (potential) benefit of all people. There is no other sacrifice for sin (Heb. 10:26).
- D. Why did Christ Suffer?
 - 1. Reason #1 from the prior context: Christ suffered as an illustration that **suffering for doing good is sometimes the will of God**. His situation is an example for us when we suffer for doing good (3:17). It may well happen to us, for it happened to the only perfect human who ever lived. It makes sense that *people* suffer for doing evil—because they commit evil and deserve punishment. But God's people suffer for doing good.

- 2. Reason #2 stated in the verse: Christ suffered **for sins**, in order to satisfy the wrath of God against rebellion, self-autonomy,

pride, evil, murder, lying, immorality, hatred, ungratefulness, and all other kinds of sin whereby God is not honored by humanity. 1 Cor. 15:3 says, “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.” We are like sheep who have strayed from their shepherd, and instead of punishing us, God turned the rod of His wrath on the Shepherd Jesus Christ (Zech. 13:7, Matt. 26:31, Mark 14:27).

- E. How did Christ suffer? As a substitute—the just in place of the unjust. He had no sin, did no sin, knew no sin, and was perfectly holy. He was therefore outfitted to be a perfect sacrifice. Be perfectly clear in your mind that orthodox Christian doctrine is described by this phrase: **the substitutionary atonement**. It is a violent and bloody business, for sure, but it is true. We cannot shrink back from the reality that “the wages of sin is death” and the only way to avoid the full measure of death including the second death is to have that death voluntarily taken by another who is qualified to take it.
- F. What was the purpose of Christ’s suffering? To reconcile us to God. His death was not merely exemplary or a demonstration of God’s anger at sin, or an impersonal, abstract sacrifice. He did it in order to bring individuals to the true God—people who were not in good standing with God.
- G. The end of the suffering was death, followed by the resurrection.

II. The Preaching of Christ to Sinners, v. 19-20

What happened between His death and His resurrection? What about Friday night and Saturday and Saturday night and early Sunday? You might have wondered what Jesus did in the realm of the dead while he was there. I trust you already know that when someone dies, their spirits are not “asleep” or unconscious. The same is the case for the spirit of Jesus after His death on the cross.

I am going to show you from Scripture that far from being asleep, Christ actually *preached* after He died. Verse 19 has the verb “preach” as its only and main verb

Luther found these verses to be confusing. In his Commentary on Peter & Jude, page 166, he writes: “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.” But we can make some headway in understanding it, simply by carefully looking at the text.

- A. With whose help did Christ preach? The Bible says “by whom” referring to the Holy Spirit at the end of verse 18. The Holy Spirit accompanied and ministered in and through Jesus, who was full of the Spirit (Luke 4:1), offered Himself through the eternal Spirit (Heb. 9:14), and was made alive by the Spirit (1 Peter 3:18).
- B. Where did Christ preach? The Bible text says, “He went” and preached to spirits “in prison.” Since these are spirits, He did not find them in the local (human) prison. He had to be in the spirit realm and he had to “go” somewhere to meet with them. Since He Himself was dead, it seems He was in a suitable “way” to be able to do that. The God of Creation making a visit to those in Hades must be a very rare occurrence, but this was a fitting time for it.
- C. When did Christ preach? It appears to me that this happened after His death and before His resurrection, which is common among the various understandings of this passage.¹ This is why I elected to preach on this topic for Good Friday service. It may seem a little strange to be focusing on this section of Scripture, yet it does provide a reasonable explanation as to what the Lord was doing while in the grave. After He was buried—then what? What was He up to in His spirit during those many hours that His body lay cold in the grave? We don’t think or talk about that very much. But it appears that Christ was doing something very significant.

¹ I freely grant that the order of verse 19 comes after the mention of Christ being “made alive” at the end of verse 18, but that does not always prove the point that events mentioned later *happened* later. Still, it is possible that Christ preached *after* he was made alive (see the new NIV translation), but it seems natural that while He was in the grave would be a perfectly logical time for Him to do this. After His resurrection, He was busy ministering to the disciples and speaking of the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3). Again, this does not totally preclude his preaching to imprisoned spirits then, but it would seem strange that He would do that in His resurrection body *before* ascending to Heaven.

- D. To whom did Christ preach? The Bible text tells us specifically that he preached “to the spirits in prison.” This raises questions—who are these spirits? Some say they are angelic spirits who were disobedient and are in chains in the deep darkness awaiting their day of judgment. I doubt that because the focus of Peter is on those who were disobedient during Noah’s day, rejecting the patience of God toward them, and only eight of them were saved. The focus is therefore on *humans*. God does not exercise patience toward angels, nor wait for their repentance, nor does He even have a program of salvation for them (Heb. 2:16). These people were disobedient during Noah’s time while he preached (2 Peter 2:5). These are humans, whose bodies were buried in the great flood, and whose spirits live on in Hades. They are “imprisoned” there, because they cannot cross over out of that place (Luke 16:26).
- E. What message did Christ preach? The text does not tell us specifically. But it seems natural that the message of Christ’s death for sinners and victory over death would be the topic of discussion. “It is finished” was the saying of Jesus just before He died (John 19:30; see also Luke 23:46 where Jesus commended his spirit into the Father’s hands—an ultimate expression of trust). The judgment of death was about to be completed as Jesus was soon to leave the grave. What was finished? The salvation plan of God. It was executed, done, implemented, fully realized. God’s way of salvation was now operable and publicized for the world, and even for the under-world, to know.

Conclusion

What is the point of all this? One implication I draw out of it is that Jesus Christ has addressed all of humanity, both living and dead, with His work. Those alive at the time of His death and those who come thereafter, like ourselves, know what He has done and can respond to it. Those who died during the wicked time of Noah know their judgment is sealed, like all others of unbelief during the Old Testament times.

To those who rejected God during the time of Noah, Christ’s message was a message of judgment. But to those who are alive right now

today, it is a message of the provision of salvation—and, if rejected, of certain future judgment.

Christ died for sinners just like us all, the perfect Lamb for sinful people, in order to bring us to God. He died and then rose again from the dead. In between His death and resurrection, He made a proclamation of his victory over sin and death, that victory which we can share with Him if we turn from sin and acknowledge Him as Lord and Savior.

Christ's work and message is a message to you as an individual, and to the world of individuals who wonder what Good Friday is all about. Simple question: what are you going to do with it? Are you so happy with your life apart from Jesus that you will await the Lord's proclamation of judgment to you too? Or will you believe in Him *now* so that your sins can be placed into Him and judged back on that day when He once died for sins, the just for the unjust, with the purpose of bringing us to God?

MAP

Major Views on This Passage

1. Augustine: Christ preached repentance through Noah while Noah was building the Ark. Christ was not present, but the Spirit spoke through Noah. The spirits were those causing great wickedness on the earth.

Reply: We do know that Noah was a preacher of righteousness according to 2 Peter 2:5, but 1 Peter 3:19 does not teach this specifically. We can say with confidence that demonic spirits were bound for future judgment as a way to restrain sin on the earth.

2. Calvin: OT saints were liberated by Christ between his death and resurrection.

Reply: This is far too broad because it speaks of all OT saints, whereas Peter is concerned with people during the time leading up to the great flood. Furthermore, Peter talks about those in prison, which hardly sounds like OT saints! Also, Peter says that Christ preached, not that He liberated anyone. He did indeed bring those in Abraham's bosom hope and eternal life, but that is not taught in this text (perhaps it is in Eph. 4:8).

3. Others: Between His death and resurrection, Christ descended to Hades and preached to sinful humans. In so doing, he offered them a second chance at salvation.

Reply: the timing and location seem to be right in this view, but “second chance theology” is antithetical to the Bible. You have opportunity to respond to God’s grace when you are alive. After that, it is judgment (Heb. 9:27).

4. Modern scholars mostly: Christ’s proclamation of victory and judgment over the evil angels who had relations with women in Genesis 6:1-4 and were imprisoned on account of that sin. MacArthur seems to take this view or a slight variant thereof in his study Bible.

Reply: the popularity of this view astounds me, for angels cannot reproduce with humans—they do not reproduce and are of an entirely different “kind.” Genesis 6:1-5 emphasizes that the wickedness of *man* (humankind) was great in the earth—not the wickedness of fallen angels. The entire focus is on humanity. And the flood judgment was on humanity as well! Anyway, I suspect the fallen angels already know they are doomed and they did not need Christ to tell them that.

5. My view: Between His death and resurrection, Christ descended to Hades and proclaimed judgment to those who rejected God during the time when God patiently waited for them to repent while Noah constructed the Ark.

Others from the OT era who died likely have overheard his message to these people. It was not a message of favor because second-chance theology is incorrect. It had to be a message of Jesus’s victory and the certain judgment of those who had rejected God in prior ages. Also overhearing were the fallen angels who now understood exactly the way that Christ was going to triumph over them (Col. 2:14-15).

6. Note the old NIV translation and the new NIV of 1 Peter 3:19, particularly the **bold** text—

Old NIV: **through whom** also he went and preached to the spirits in prison.

New NIV: **After being made alive**, he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits.

The new NIV takes a big step of interpretation in its translation when it adds “after being made alive.” They are suggesting that after the resurrection (and ascension?) Christ preached to the imprisoned spirits. That is a unique view. And it is unnecessary because Jesus Christ’s spirit never died, just like all spirits of humans or angels or God which ever live. God is not the God of the dead, but of the living.

I believe this translation is a terrible mistake. It departs from any of the major understandings of the passage, and does so on very shaky translational grounds. All other English translations are like the old NIV. Sometimes, the old *is* better!