

## It's a Matter of Interpretation

I Peter 3:19-20

If I came home one evening and Robyn told me as she headed out the door that she had a meeting to go to and dinner was in the oven there would be some room for interpretation on what she meant.

I could interpret that to mean that dinner was done and in the oven staying warm.

I could take it to mean that dinner was cooking in the oven and still had time before it was ready.

I could take it to mean that it was prepared and in the oven, but I would have to turn it on and bake it.

If I were to tell you that my car can do 150 miles per hour there is room for interpretation on what I meant by that statement.

It could mean that I have driven 150 miles per hour.

It could mean that my speedometer goes up to 150 miles per hour even though I have never driven that fast personally.

It can also mean that it will only go that fast if it's pushed over a tall cliff.

In my pre-marital counseling we talk about the importance of communication and the need for clarifying questions if you want to avoid a heated argument. The example I give is if (Luke) is driving home from work and (Sarah) calls and asks him to stop by the store and pick up some milk. That statement alone is open for interpretation or misinterpretation on the part of (Luke).

Which store?

What brand?

What flavor? White, chocolate, strawberry, butter milk, soy, soy vanilla, almond, etc

Whole, 2%, or skim?

What size? Gallon, half gallon, quart, pint

He better get it right.

The passage we are dealing with this morning has been considered by many commentators to be one of the most difficult and controversial passages of the New Testament to interpret and understand. It

seems like no matter what your position others will strongly oppose it. I read about a dozen different commentaries of which none of them agreed on the meaning. The Pulpit Commentary identifies about two dozen different authors all with conflicting views. Even Martin Luther admitted that he didn't know what Peter was saying here. Greek scholar A. T. Robertson states that it is unclear if His preaching was to those in prison during Noah's day or who are now in prison.

If there is so much room for interpretation and scholars can't agree how are we to understand it? It might be better to sing a song and go home, but since you are here we might as well consider what Peter, led by the Spirit in writing this, had to say and what it might mean to us today.

Let's read the passage and you will immediately understand the conundrum.

I Peter 3:18-22

Here are a few questions I have that are puzzling for interpreters to which you may add your own,

Why would Jesus preach to spirits in prison?

When did He preach to these spirits?

What was His message?

Was He giving them a second chance at salvation?

Was it only to certain spirits that He preached?

Who are these spirits?

Does baptism save?

What other questions might you have?

Fortunately we have other Scripture to turn to that can help in our understanding of this text. We will deal with baptism next week.

Now, as I have said on other occasions, I am going to give you my view of what I think Peter is saying. My word is not the definitive interpretation because there are many scholars a lot smarter than I am who hold to a different meaning, but as I considered the passage, I want to share my view and if you happen to disagree regarding what vs. 19 and 20 say, this is

not a theological hill for me to die on.

One author suggested that in preaching this passage the pastor should only present one view to avoid confusing the audience with multiple views. I'm not going to take that advice. I am not going to give you all the different ideas about its meanings because it would take more than a month of Sundays. I think you can take all of them and boil them down into three main interpretations. Let's briefly consider the possibilities of interpretation.

## I. THE POSSIBILITIES OF INTERPRETATION

The first view we might call the pre-incarnate view.

### A. The Pre-Incarnate View

Essentially this view holds that in a pre-incarnate state Jesus went and preached through Noah by the empowering Holy Spirit to the wicked generation at that time. The message was one of repentance with an invitation to be saved by entering the ark.

A second view we might call the pre-resurrection view to fallen angels

### B. The Pre-Resurrection View of Fallen Angels

In this view, proponents believe that between His death on the cross and His resurrection three days later Christ went to the prison where the fallen angels are held. There He preached to them a message of His victory over death and sin. This group of fallen angels during the days of Noah left their natural state and married human women resulting in a wicked generation and only Noah and his family remained righteous.

Similar to this view is the third view: the pre-resurrection view of fallen men.

### C. The Pre-Resurrection View of Fallen Men

This is similar to the previous view but instead of preaching to fallen angels between His death and resurrection, Jesus preached to the souls of those from Noah's day who were imprisoned waiting for judgment day. Some believed He preached victory over death, others believed that He preached the gospel giving them one more opportunity to repent before final judgment.

A variation of the last two changes the timing of His preaching. Some believe that instead of preaching between His death and resurrection He did so when He ascended to heaven before He took His throne.

And from these three there are many possibilities. What we can say for sure is that Christ went to the underworld to make a proclamation to "spirits". So let's consider the preaching of Christ.

## II. THE PREACHING OF CHRIST – vs. 19-20a

### A. When Did Christ Preach?

The opening of verse 19 refers back to the last part of verse 18. "Through whom" or "in which also" speaks of what Christ did during the time He was in the tomb. Remember that His physical body was dead (v. 18), but His spirit was alive. The verse says that He went which means He went from one place to another. The word speaks of someone going on a journey. So where did He go? We'll get there in a minute.

It is my belief that this passage is not referring to a pre-incarnate Christ going to preach through Noah by the Holy Spirit to an unregenerate people.

I also don't believe that on His ascension to heaven that He took a detour through Hades to make this preaching stop.

I do believe that He preached between His death and resurrection. But to whom did He preach? Who are these spirits? That adds to the puzzle.

## B. To Whom Did Christ Preach?

We know the answer in part because the text tells us who Jesus preached to. “He went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago.”

From the context of the passage we know that these “spirits” were from the days of Noah. That they were in prison implies they were wicked. Prison is for those who have disobeyed the law. They broke God’s law. The question is this: were these “spirits” human or fallen angels? Let’s look at the word spirit for a moment, because, for me at least, therein lies the answer.

Peter uses the Greek word pneumasin which is translated “spirit” instead of the Greek word psuchai which means soul. In the New Testament pneumasin or spirit is never used in reference to people unless it is qualified by a genitive which speaks of something possessive. For example: Hebrews 12:23 “To the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect.” (emphasis mine)

From the fall of Adam and Eve, Satan and his demons have been waging a battle between the angelic forces of good and evil. When Adam and Eve came on the scene the spiritual battle spilled over into this world. Adam and Eve unfortunately drank the Kool-Aid and swallowed the lie that they could become like God knowing good and evil. God put on them and this world a curse, but it came with a promise. It’s a promise noted throughout Scripture. Beginning in Genesis 3:15 God promised the destruction of Satan by the Messiah and the redemption of fallen man also through this Messiah. Even though He would experience a wound, the evil one would receive a crushing blow. From that promise Satan has sought to destroy the godly line through whom the promised Messiah would come. He almost succeeded in the day of King Joash. His grandmother Athaliah sought to destroy the royal

line and take the crown. The only one to survive her murderous rampage was Joash who was rescued by his aunt, sister of the deceased King Azariah. The Messianic line continued.

Satan made another attempt to murder the Messiah when King Herod ordered all the infants to be killed following the visit of the Magi. Then He attempted to thwart God’s plan in the wilderness when Christ was tempted. The final effort came when he incited the religious leaders to call for His crucifixion. The demonic realm must have been reveling in a victory celebration at His death and burial believing that the last, best hope for mankind now lay motionless in the grave.

It is my belief that these “spirits” in prison to whom Jesus preached were not the souls of wicked men, but wicked “spirits” who roamed the earth during the time of Noah. Now, we’re going to talk about the where in a moment, but let me just say here that this place is reserved for the most wicked and vile of all the fallen angels. What was it they did that they would be considered the most perverted of fallen angels?

Jude 6-7

Genesis 6:1-5

From Genesis 1 and 2 we understand that God created everything and there was a created order which also included marriage between a man and a woman. As I have studied these passages I believe that what happened in Genesis 6 is the cohabitation between fallen angels and human women. It was an attempt to corrupt the human race and it almost succeeded since all but 8 were wiped out. What occurred in Genesis 6 was the most egregious act to disrupt the God-ordained institute of marriage. When it speaks of the “sons of God” and the “daughters of men” we see a contrast between supernatural beings and women. It is not referring to the righteous line of Seth and the fallen line of Cain. The demonic forces attacked marriage and procreation that influenced the generations leading

up to the flood, which brought about their destruction. The “sons of God” cannot be men because otherwise they would be called the sons of men. Neither can they be from the line of Seth suggesting that men were righteous and women were unrighteous.

The oldest traditional Jewish view, one also held by early church fathers is that the sons of God were fallen angels. In the Old Testament the term sons of God always refers to angels and in this case fallen angels. Remember that they were once in the presence of God, before they rebelled and were cast out of heaven.

Now since angels are spirits how can they cohabit with women? John MacArthur points out that “they defied God by leaving their spirit world to enter the human realm (as Satan had entered the animal world in Eden” possessing if you will, the serpent who beguiled Eve). We would consider this to be the first biblical record of demon-possession. These demons entered the bodies of men and took wives. Genesis 6:4 describes the kind of wicked, demonic influence of the offspring that was born to them: “every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.”

MacArthur adds “That the people were open to demons shows the evil of man at the time. Those wicked, demon-possessed men then produced a generation that was nothing but corrupt inside and out, needing to be destroyed.”

Noah’s generation was unbelievably wicked. Genesis 6 speaks of a race of people called the Nephilim. They were described as giants in the land and were considered great heroes and warriors by man’s viewpoint, but God considered them extremely wicked. The word Nephilim actually means fallen ones in Hebrew. They violated God’s created order by their cohabitation with human women. It is to these fallen angels that Christ preached who came from the days of Noah.

### C. Where Did Christ Preach?

Our text says that He preached to those in “prison”. The Greek word literally means a cage. It is also referred to in Revelation 20:7 as the place where Satan is bound for 1,000 years.

There are several Greek words that refer to the underworld and help us understand where Christ went.

The first is gehenna which comes from a Hebrew word for Valley of Hinnom. It was located just outside Jerusalem and was a deep, narrow ravine with steep, rocky sides. It was the natural boundary that separated the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. On the southern extremity overlooking the eastern part of the valley King Solomon set up an altar to worship Molech. It was on that altar that children were offered as burnt sacrifices to the demon god. When Josiah came to the throne he did away with the altar and desecrated it by spreading the bones of the dead and other rubbish over it. Afterward it became the city dump where trash was thrown and where a continual fire burned to consume the trash. The Jews considered this site a picture of the very fires of hell itself.

The next term is hades which is the Greek equivalent to the Hebrew word sheol. This was the word they used when they referred to the unseen underworld. In the Old Testament it referred to the grave or place of burial referring to the state of death. Jesus spoke of this place in the parable He told about the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 23. It was described as a place with two realms separated by an impassable gap. One place was called “Abraham’s bosom” and “paradise” where the souls there experienced comfort, joy, peace, and rest. The other place was one of intense and continuous torment.

The third term used to describe the underworld is abyss or bottomless pit. It has an unending depth. We sometimes hear of sink holes opening up and swallowing cars or houses. This hole has no

bottom. When Jesus cast out the legion of demons from the man of Gadara they were terrified that Jesus would send them to the Abyss (Luke 8:31). During the time of the Great Tribulation a mass of horrifying locust-like evil spirits will be released from there to wreak havoc on the ungodly.

The final word used of the underworld is Tartarus. It's only used once by Peter in his second letter. II Peter 2:4

What's interesting is that Peter chooses to use a term taken from Greek mythology rather than using a term found elsewhere in Scripture. I think it was intentional because remember this audience is made up of Greeks in Asia Minor. They would clearly understand the meaning of what Peter is saying. Homer wrote that Tartarus was the place the Titans or giants were sent who rebelled against Zeus.

John Phillips writes that "Tartarus is the prison where the twice-fallen angels are kept." They are twice fallen because they rebelled with Satan when he rebelled against God and was cast out of heaven and then fallen the second time during their demonic romp in the time of Noah, cast and held there, as Peter says, until final judgment.

Into this place Christ went to preach. So the question remains, what did He preach?

#### D. What Did Christ Preach?

As I said in the beginning there are some who believe that the message Christ preached to these "spirits" was evangelistic, giving them a second chance to amend their ways and get right with God at which time they would then be released. But if that is the case then Peter was wrong when he wrote that they were being held there until final judgment. There is no hope of parole for them. Their sentence won't be commuted. They won't be pardoned. There is no second chance for fallen angels or for any person who refuses Christ.

Here's why I say that. If Peter intended to mean that they could in some way be saved he would have used the word we translate as evangelize – euangelizo. Instead he used another word that means to proclaim or herald. In the ancient world when a General or King won a victory on the battle field he would send a herald ahead of the victorious army to go through each town announcing or heralding the victory.

Again John MacArthur writes that "Christ went to proclaim His victory to the enemy by announcing His triumph over sin, death, hell, demons, and Satan." The chains of death, sin, and the grave could not hold Him.

Paul attests to this when he writes in I Corinthians 15:54b-57: "the saying that is written will come true: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.' 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

I think the clue is back in verse 18: "For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the spirit."

There isn't any other more victorious message than that. Paul puts the victory message in these simple terms: Christ died, Christ was buried, and Christ rose again. (I Corinthians 15:3-4) Victory!

You might be wondering why spend a lot of time talking about this when there are so many opinions on what these verses actually means. I can think of one very important reason without which you are still lost in your sin.

If Christ in fact preached a message of victory - that is our hope and we have a lot to be grateful for. It was victory for Him and victory for us. His resurrection is our V-Day.

Paul wrote that if Christ is still dead and in the

grave we are to be really pitied because we are believing a big, fat lie. If Christ wasn't raised from the dead then there is no way any of us will be raised from the dead either. If Christ didn't rise from the dead then your faith, my faith is worthless and based only on empty, foundationless dreams. 1 Corinthians 15:14-20 – [14]And face it--if there's no resurrection for Christ, everything we've told you is smoke and mirrors, and everything you've staked your life on is smoke and mirrors. [15] Not only that, but we would be guilty of telling a string of barefaced lies about God, all these affidavits we passed on to you verifying that God raised up Christ--sheer fabrications, if there's no resurrection. [16] If corpses can't be raised, then Christ wasn't, because he was indeed dead. [17] And if Christ wasn't raised, then all you're doing is wandering about in the dark, as lost as ever. [18] It's even worse for those who died hoping in Christ and resurrection, because they're already in their graves. [19] If all we get out of Christ is a little inspiration for a few short years, we're a pretty sorry lot. [20] But the truth is that Christ has been raised up, the first in a long legacy of those who are going to leave the cemeteries.

Paul declares that Christ has in fact been raised from the dead. He was victorious over sin and death and the grave.

His victory is our victory.

Rise up and give a victory cry.

Rise up and shout hallelujah.

Rise up your because your redemption is nearer than when you first believed.

Here's why this passage matters. Not only is it a proclamation of victory on the one hand, it is an urgent call on the other for those who have never trusted Christ as Savior to repent and through faith believe that Christ died and rose again to bring you to God (v. 18). Judgment is coming. This life is the only time you will be presented with an opportunity for salvation otherwise what's the point. If we had a second chance to be saved after death before the

great judgment we might as well live it up now and do whatever we want. But that's not the case. The writer of Hebrews says we should repent while it is still called today. God is patient, but His patience will one day end resulting in punishment.

And verse 20 speaks of the patience of God.

### III. THE PATIENCE OF GOD – v. 20b

“...God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water.”

#### A. His Patience Is Displayed

The word “wait” means to wait out to the end. God waited as long as He could in Noah's day. The term patience used here means the same as longsuffering used in the Old Testament. It's a compound word in the Greek and means to be long tempered. You probably know someone who is very short tempered. We sometime describe them as having a very short fuse. Anything big or little will set them off in an instant. They just blow up.

On the other hand God is said here to be patient. Galatians 5:22 says it is one of His attributes that the Holy Spirit is working to develop in us. It is to suffer long instead of being instantly provoked by those who rub us the wrong way. Instead of immediately unloading we bear with the person. We are long tempered with them.

*Vine's Dictionary of New Testament Words* defines it as “that quality of self-restraint in the face of provocation which does not hastily retaliate or promptly punish; it is the opposite of anger, and is associated with mercy.” Patience is an attribute of God.

Psalm 86:15 “But You, O Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.”

The word love here is also translated mercy.

Exodus 34:6-7a “And He passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, ‘The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin Yet He does not leave the guilty unpunished.’”

God’s patience is vividly seen in II Peter 3:9 where we are told that He is not willing that any should perish in their sin but that all should come to repentance. Praise God that He was patient with us.

And in our text, which references the period of time it took Noah to build the ark, God was incredibly patient. He waited to see if anyone else would join Noah and his family in the ark. In the end, none would join them. His patience had run out and it was time to judge. The floods came and His punishment is deployed.

#### B. His Punishment Is Deployed

While no one knows how many people were living in the pre-deluvian period, educated guesses based on population growth today make estimates to be about 750 million people. Remember that people lived hundreds and hundreds of years vs. today. Methuselah was 969 years old when he died. The death toll in Mexico City from the recent earthquake is over 1000 men, women and children. It is a real tragedy. A global flood destroyed everyone except eight people who by faith entered the ark. Building the ark wasn’t enough. They had to trust God that He would take them through the flood. Only eight. Talk about feeling alone in the universe. One morning you wake up, head to the market teeming with people and the next morning the world is awash with a flood that wiped out everything on the earth except you, your family, and the animals inside the ark. God was patient and then it was time to act in judgment to punish man’s wickedness.

If you have not yet trusted Christ for salvation, how much longer will you wait? God’s patience will only last so long.

Hebrews 9:27 “And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment.”

It was in the news and passed along on Facebook that the world would end yesterday. With all the recent natural events a Christian numerologist cited Luke 21:25-26 as a text that the second coming of Christ was supposed to have happened on 9/23. He claimed that the passage was significant because on August 21 there was the solar eclipse and then on the 25<sup>th</sup> hurricane Harvey hit. He said that 33 days after the solar eclipse would be the end of the world. 33 is the number of times God’s name Elohim appears. It was Jesus’ age when He died.

Why mention this? My point is that Jesus said two important things about His return. Only the Father knows the day and time and we are to be ready. Noah and his family were ready. Are you? If you are not, know that God’s patience is running out. There may not be much time. Christ died for you to bring you to God. He told Nicodemus that those who believe in Him will be given eternal life, but eternal punishment awaits those who aren’t ready.

While some things are difficult to understand, two things are clear: how a person is saved and what punishment awaits those who are not.