

Hope PCA Sermon: March 17, 2024

“Peter’s Gospel” (1 Peter 3:18–22)

Rev. Martin Hedman

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Whell, we come to an interesting section of Peter’s first letter, which I’ll talk a little bit more about later, just let me give you a fair warning in advance. This is going to be a much more technical sermon than I normally would give and normally would try to avoid to focus on the proclamation of the Word. But there are things we need to understand here. But if you would please stand as we honor God’s Word in its reading. This is 1 Peter 3 verses 18-22, God’s very own living and abiding Word.

¹⁸ For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹ in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, ²⁰ because they formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. ²¹ Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

Thus far, the reading from God’s holy, infallible, inerrant Word. Again, may He write it upon our hearts, may it bear fruit in our lives. Please be seated. Let me briefly pray for us.

Lord God, this is your Word. There are times when your Word says things that confuse us. We hope that you will help us work through that confusion to some clarity here this morning. We thank you. We praise you again in Christ Jesus’ name. Amen.

Preaching through books of the Bible from beginning to end has quite a long history going back to the days of the early church. One early father, John Chrysostom, is known for it among the early fathers. You can find sermons of his progressing through books of the Bible. It fell out of use for whatever reason after the time of the fathers, and enjoyed a revival at the time of the Reformation. If my memory is correct, I think it was Zwingli in Zurich, who was an early adopter of this idea of preaching through a book of the Bible, verse by verse, or passage by passage. And it was taken up by Luther, Calvin, and others, and became a common practice, particularly among the Reformed churches, but I don’t think just in the Protestant churches, but elsewhere as well. And then it fell into disuse again. Why? I don’t know. Maybe some people thought of it as too intellectual, with the rise of charismaticism, not spirit-led enough. And I can remember as a kid growing up in church, sitting there wondering how hard it must be to be a pastor because how does he pick a verse every week to preach on? What motivates him to pick these texts that seem so randomly separated from one another?

But it's been enjoying a rebirth in recent times. It's helpful because it ensures that as we go through different books of the Bible, the whole counsel of God is covered. That's important for us to be exposed to, especially as that happens over a longer period of time. It's good because it keeps us preachers off our own particular hobby horses. I've got things I like to talk about. I've got things I'd rather preach about sometimes. But that's not for me to decide, especially on an ad hoc basis. Preaching through a book of the Bible keeps us grounded, keeps me grounded. But it also prevents preachers from skipping over difficult passages. In fact, one of the commentaries I read on this passage said, "Just combine it with some other verses and don't talk about it much." I'm paraphrasing, but that was essentially the advice given.

This is a hard passage. It's confusing. It's been considered one of, if not the most difficult passages in the whole Bible to interpret. So what am I doing this morning? Virtually every commentary I looked at (there was one or two exceptions) contained this quote from Martin Luther. Here's what he says, quote, "This is as strange a text and enigmatic a saying as there is anywhere in the New Testament, so that I do not yet know exactly what St. Peter means." If Martin Luther can't figure it out, what opportunity is there for us? Strange, enigmatic.

Well, there have been a number of attempts, not just in recent times, but going back again to the early, early days of the Church Fathers, trying to explain some difficult parts of this passage, particularly what we find in verses 19 through 21. It presents a translator, or even a Greek reader, with a variety of options of understanding what's being said. Not just the vocabulary, but the grammar — how it's used. What's being said here, there, and in various places. There's very little consensus, although three primary ways of interpreting one of the questions have arisen. So what I want to do is, there's really two questions in verses 19 to 21. I want to deal with them in sequence, and then kind of take a step back and focus on verses 18 and 22, which really do go together and are much more clear. And I think with other things Peter has told us in this letter already, it provides us a really nice summary of what I'm calling Peter's gospel. So we'll get there, God willing, at the end.

The first big question that we have to figure out in these verses is in verses 19 and 20 in particular. It's about these spirits in prison. Look again at how Peter says it. He's talking about Christ, suffered, died, rose again, "*... made alive in the spirit, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey when God's patience waited in the days of Noah while the ark was being prepared.*" What is Peter talking about? Who are these spirits in prison? Were they people alive during Noah's day and are now, of course, dead? Were they the Old Testament saints in Abraham's bosom? Are they imprisoned angelic beings? And if so, what and why? Who is speaking to them? Again, the vocabulary, the grammar doesn't make it explicitly clear. Is it Christ Himself speaking to these imprisoned spirits? Is it the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, speaking to these imprisoned spirits? Is it Noah? Or is it Christ and the Holy Spirit through Noah? Who's speaking? And when did this happen? Did it happen during Noah's time? Did it happen while Jesus was in the grave? Did it happen after His resurrection? And what's being said to them? Is it the gospel? Is it some sort of warning to repent of judgment coming? Or is it a declaration of victory? There's legitimate options that can be made as we try to understand what's going on in this passage.

Three main ways that people answer these questions. The first is this: this is about Noah. It's primarily about Noah and his time and the people who lived then. Jesus, through the Spirit, as with other Old Testament prophets, is speaking through Noah, prophetically, to an unbelieving generation imprisoned by their spiritual blindness. Spirits imprisoned in blindness. It's a very common interpretation. Again, it goes all the way back to the early church fathers. It has the advantage of being very straightforward, being very easy to remember, and I bet many of you have heard that explanation before. There are problems with it. Why single out that one generation in a letter that's going to the whole church and just talking about the whole church and its life? What does it have to do with Peter's time? What does it have to do with our time?

The common response to that: well, it's a metaphor for all disobedient people everywhere in all ages. There's a problem in that the flow of this passage, especially in verses 19 and 22, is pretty simple, and it goes like this, and you can hear it, in the Apostles' Creed and in the Nicene Creed. In fact, some people believe Peter is drawing upon an early creed of the church. Here's the flow: Christ suffered, was put to death, was made alive, and has gone into heaven at the right hand of God. That's the flow of the passage. Peter's basic understanding is that Jesus is alive and he's ascended to the Father.

So why, after this has happened, would we talk about something that takes us back in time to preach to Noah or to preach to his generation, even in or by the Spirit? There's also a problem with thinking of the imprisoned spirits as some sort of metaphor. The weight of the preponderance of New Testament usage of the word translated "spirits" is that it typically refers to angelic beings, heavenly beings, whether obedient or disobedient. So that view is beginning to fall out of favor.

Another very common option that goes back to the days of the very early church. Again, probably something many of you have heard of before. The basic idea here in this second option is that while Jesus was in the grave the Saturday between his death and resurrection, His spirit went to the place of the dead and preached the gospel to the Old Testament saints who were in Abraham's bosom, or possibly to all the dead, including the disobedient people of Noah's time, so that they could believe. Sometimes this is known as the *descendis* view, for a Latin term for descent or descending. Again, it's pretty easy to remember, pretty straightforward. Fits well with our common understanding of the phrase from the Apostles' Creed that he descended into hell.

But yet again there's a couple issues in particular with that phrase in the Apostles' Creed. That phrase did not appear until about 400 AD. The Creed goes back probably at least two centuries before that. And a man, a scholar named Rufinus, wrote a commentary on the Apostles' Creed. This Rufinus is mostly known for translating origin from Greek into Latin. And it appears that he used this phrase, "descended into hell", as kind of a commentary on and a way of explaining the more typical wording that we have in the Nicene Creed: he suffered, he died, and was buried. So in place of "and was buried", he commented, "Well, he descended into hell." Probably meant it figuratively, but it's persisted, it's kept on. His commentary on the creed is available to us even today. Very popular over the centuries.

But there's another issue with the Apostles' Creed. It's not a huge one, I don't think, but it indeed was never formally adopted by any council of the Church. Does it make it invalid? We use the Athanasian Creed as well, which was never adopted by a council. But the wording, therefore, doesn't carry the same weight as the creeds that were adopted by councils where the wording was formally examined and approved. So its association with the Apostles' Creed, this theory's association with that creed, is a little bit tenuous, a little bit weak. It suffers from similar advantages to the first option: why do these spirits need to be preached to? Are we being anachronistic, talking about going back in time to those who lived at the same time of Noah? Why do these spirits in prison need to be preached to if their Old Testament saints were told elsewhere in the New Testament that they believed based on the promises of God and thereby were counted righteous, just like Abraham? The hall of faith, the hall of saints in Hebrews 11, for example.

And why would Old Testament saints be described as being in prison? Being imprisoned. There's no reason for them to be incarcerated. They're Old Testament saints. And often people will take this view and include in these spirits in prison not just the Old Testament saints, but everybody who died. Some of them just before Christ, some of them everybody who died anytime. And there's a real problem with that because it opens the door to universalism, universal salvation, or the opportunity to hear the gospel after we're dead and have one last chance to believe. It's a doctrine that's widely, and justly so, rejected. It doesn't fit at all with the testimony of the rest of Scripture, that there are those whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life and those whose names are written in other books. That there's the sheep and the goats, the wheat and the tares. And it doesn't fit with Peter's timeline in this passage. Christ is in heaven. Before he even gets to all this stuff, in verse 18, he's been put to death in the flesh and made alive in the spirit. So the Christ made alive in the spirit is the one who's being talked about in verse 19.

So the first two views that have been around for a long, long time are slowly being rethought among scholars and students of Scripture. And there's a third option that's becoming more widely accepted. It's not perfect, but for me at least it seems to fit the text and answer some of the other issues in which the first two views don't really fit very well.

There's a background to this. In Asia Minor (if you go back to chapter 1 verse 1), Paul is writing to the elect exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, Bithynia. These are places in Asia Minor. We know from other sources that in this part of the world, they loved the story of Noah. It was part of their culture, it was part of their celebrations, part of their remembrances, a big story that they told. The other piece of literature that they were quite fond of, as many in the early church were, is a book called First Enoch. We consider it an apocryphal book. Talk about each of those more in a little bit. But those are background to how this third option sees these verses working.

This third view sees the spirits consistently with the other New Testament usage as being heavenly beings. So imprisoned spirits would be, therefore, they'd have to be disobedient fallen angels. And the good news is we know something about these fallen angels from other parts of Scripture. If you have it handy, turn over to 2 Peter 2 verse 4. Peter's writing again to the church. He's talking about the judgment that will come to false prophets and those who

continue in sensuality and evil, rejecting truth, engaging in blasphemy. And he makes a comparison, starting in verse 4. These will be dealt with by God: “For if God did not spare angels when they sinned and cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment;” (if he did not spare the ancient world). And then he goes on to talk about Noah, Sodom and Gomorrah, and other things. In other words, he’s describing God as having judged angels, put them in chains, and bound them. They’ve been judged, they’re in gloomy darkness, kept there until the judgment comes. Sounds like imprisoned spirits, right? And then if you skip past John’s letters and go to Jude, verse 6 of that one-chapter letter, Jude does something similar. He talks about Jesus’ saving work and bringing his people out of Egypt after destroying those who did not believe. That’s most likely a reference to the Egyptians who chased the Hebrews out and were destroyed as the waters of the sea came flowing back in on them. And then in verse 6: “And the angels, who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, He has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day.” And he also goes on to talk about Sodom and Gomorrah and other instances of judgment.

So we know something about imprisoned spirits. There are angels who have fallen, angels who have rebelled, who are kept in chains until the day of the final judgment. And this judgment is associated with other judgments, and basically both authors are saying if God judged these people, he will judge evildoers and sinners today, therefore look to Christ. That’s the simplistic way of understanding what they’re saying. So this understanding of imprisoned spirits agrees with these passages but it also I think fits with Peter’s overall flow as he discusses the context of suffering for the church and how we’ve seen already in the letter God will protect and preserve his people. He will vindicate. Judgment is coming. So I think it makes sense that these imprisoned spirits are more likely fallen angels.

But what’s being said to these fallen, imprisoned heavenly beings, imprisoned on account of their rebellion against God? We get an idea from this in the word, I think translated well, in the English Standard Version in verse 19: “... *put to death in the flesh, made alive in the spirit, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison.*” Often people make the assumption or even translate it as a different word: preach. The word is “proclaim”. It’s quite simple, quite straightforward. There’s a very good word for preaching the gospel that’s used throughout the New Testament. It’s where we get our English word “evangelism”. So it’s probably not likely that Peter’s referring to the gospel, or he would have used a word that was perfectly good for it. He uses a different word, just a simple proclamation, a simple declaration. And we get a clue what that word is from verse 22, and the overall themes of 1 Peter. What would Jesus proclaim — the risen Jesus, made alive — proclaim to imprisoned spirits? Well, look at verse 22. Not only has he been made alive, he’s “...*gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.*” What’s he saying to these imprisoned spirits? “Victory!” Triumph.

Peter here, I think, is saying something very similar to what Paul says in his letter to the Colossians, where the theme is the authority of Christ over principalities and powers. Chapter 2 verse 15: “[God] disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to shame by triumphing over them in [Christ].” And Paul’s drawing on the image of a Roman emperor having conquered, bringing his captives in chains, in shame, in the triumphal parade: “Look

at who I've conquered." This is what God does in Christ. The words aren't exactly the same in Colossians 2:15 and 1 Peter 3:22, but here in Peter we have angels, authorities, and powers subjected to Christ as he's taken up his position, a position of authority at God's right hand. Christ's ascension also, again, fits into the flow of the passage. He died, he was made alive, he went to heaven. So now this ruling, reigning Christ at the right hand of the Father, proclaims victory. Triumph.

Then there's a big question: how in the world does this relate to Noah? This beloved story, even in that time and place. And also 1 Enoch, a non-scriptural book that discusses these things. Well, part of 1st Enoch tells the story of the Nephilin, or Nephilim, people who he argues are descendants of disobedient angels who married human women and had children with them. These were the Nephilim, the giants, the men of renown that are described in Genesis 6 verses 1 through 4, where they are described as "sons of God". The sons of God married the daughters of men. Well, "sons of God" in the Old Testament frequently is used to describe angelic beings. So there's a correspondence here. The idea then would be that these disobedient sons of God are among those imprisoned spirits to whom Christ's victory proclamation is being made. Victory. And Peter uses them as a familiar example to his readers. They've read 1 Enoch. They know the story. They share the story of Noah around the dinner table. It's part of their culture. But if its idea's in 2 Peter and in Jude that describe disobedient angels and others who are judged and the disobedient angels imprisoned until the Day of Judgment. Now, that's a little bit of a harder explanation to remember, but it seems, I think, to do justice to the broader biblical testimony and to the context of 1 Peter, where again, we are vindicated before the Father, those who have suffered for doing good, which is where we ended last week.

So that's the first puzzle. Aye, aye, aye. Let's move on. The second puzzle: what is Peter saying about baptism? This is in verses 20 and 21. He "... *proclaimed to the spirits in prison, [because] they formerly did not obey, [when] God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, [that is] eight persons, were brought safely through water.*" And then he says baptism corresponds to this. "*[It] now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body, but an appeal to God for a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.*" He's saying a lot in those two verses. I think we can, with the third interpretation above, understand God's patience as He's waiting to judge sinful humanity. It took Noah a hundred years to build the ark. During that time, God is patient with sinful humanity. Also, by implication, if the third interpretation about the imprisoned spirits is correct, He's being patient with them as well. Judgment is coming, but God is forbearing during this time while Noah builds the ark.

There's also a three-part repeated idea in these two verses. It's very simple. Verse 20: a few were brought safely or saved through water. A few saved through water. Verse 21: you (you few Christians) are now saved through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. An echo, a repeat. There's a correspondence then, Peter is saying, between us and Noah and his family: a few are saved. They survived in the judgment of the deluge and water that wiped out every living thing except those who were on the ark. We who are saved and will survive God's judgment of death for sin because Christ Jesus has risen from death to life, conquering sin, death, and the devil. In Jesus' resurrection, we understand to be a demonstration of God's accepting of

His saving work for sinners. “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.” He took the wrath of judgment for sin. The penalty’s been paid. He rises from death to life, the firstfruits of those who believe. So all who believe in Christ Jesus, repenting of sin and turning to him in faith, will survive that great day of judgment, which far surpasses the flood, which was a foretaste of what is to come.

Again, there’s a correspondence between Noah’s family and Christian believers. Both saved by God’s mercy. Both saved by God’s grace. Baptism, he says, also corresponds. It’s not a washing. We’re not using water to clean dirt off of ourselves. And after all, Noah and his family went through the flood dry. The rain fell on the outside of the ark. The ark floated above the waters. That’s not what saves. He says it’s *“an appeal for a good conscience.”* And I think this idea of a good conscience has two things going with it. The first, if you look back to verse 16 of chapter 3: we’re to have a good conscience that our good works for which we might be persecuted will vindicate us and will eventually put our enemies to shame. The last part of that section we looked at last week, verse 17: it’s better to suffer for doing good than doing evil. So those who do good and suffer have a clear conscience. They have a good conscience. They know their suffering is unjust. And again, from what Peter’s taught us, God is going to vindicate us and punish those who revile us and do evil to us. So that’s one aspect of having a good conscience. We know we’re doing the right thing, even in the midst of the suffering we may face.

But there’s a second idea, and I think this goes back to Psalm 32, in particular verse 2. Psalm 32 is a penitential psalm, the psalm of the repentant sinner who nevertheless is blessed by God. And one of the more shocking verses, I think, in all of Scripture: *“Blessed is the man [in verse 2] against whom the Lord counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.”* Or we might say, “in whom there is no guile”. The idea is not that the person never lies, because we all sin and fall short of God’s glory. But who is this person who’s blessed because their sins aren’t counted against them? And the psalm gets us to an answer in verse 5, but it requires something that’s very difficult: honesty. That’s what’s being described, “in whose spirit is no deceit.” I’m honest about myself. I’m honest in particular about my own sin. I’m honest to myself that my sin deserves God’s wrath and just punishment. So blessing comes in the acknowledgment of that, and we see it in verse 5 of the psalm: “I acknowledged my sin to you. I did not cover my iniquity. ‘I said ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,’ and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.” That is the person in whom there is no deceit. I acknowledged my sin. I repented of it. You forgave the iniquity of my sin.

That’s also what it means to have a good conscience: I’m honest about myself, who I am before the Lord, confessing it to God and seeking His forgiveness. Baptism is a picture of that, an outward sign of an inward reality that we who were dead in our sins have been raised to new life by grace through faith in Christ Jesus. deserving judgment — whether it’s the flood in Noah’s time or the final judgment at the end of time — but instead we pass through it. Noah and his family in the ark through water; we through the resurrection of Christ Jesus.

That leads us to Peter’s gospel. The prior passage, he’s just exhorted us to be ready to give a defense, to provide an answer for the hope that’s in us. And I think in some way, Peter’s modeling that for us, especially in verses 18 and 22. Most people see verses 19 to 21 as kind

of a segue or a tangent or parenthesis by Peter. But verse 18 is quite clear: "*Christ suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.*" That's a glorious statement. Christ suffered once. Hebrews agrees: many animals had to be sacrificed over and over continually because they couldn't satisfactorily deal with human sin, but Jesus died once and took care of everything. So his sacrifice is superior. It's complete. And it was a substitutionary sacrifice: He took our place, the righteous for the unrighteous. Took the penalty that we deserve: death. We talked about Colossians 2:15. Colossians 2:14, right before that, reminds us of the written record of our sins that was nailed to the cross with Christ. Our sins were made to be his sins, says the apostle in 2 Corinthians 5:21: "He who knew no sin was made to be sin, so that in him we might be the righteousness of God."

And then Christ "*... died in the flesh, but was made alive in the Spirit.*" Another echo of the Apostle Paul. In 1 Corinthians 15:45: "The first [man] Adam became a living being, but the [second] Adam became a life-giving spirit." So that, later in verse 49, we who bear the image of the first Adam, this body of dust, will one day bear the image of Jesus Christ — "the man of heaven" Paul calls him. In other words, one day we will have the same kind of glorified body at the resurrection. And then also in verse 22, Jesus, having been made alive, "*... has gone into heaven [and is] at the right hand of God*" and saw there the tie to the imprisoned spirits over whom he has authority. The verse flows from 19 to 22.

And here's the kicker: He did these things so that He might bring us to God. To God. Where God is. Where He has authority over heavenly beings and powers that might try to tempt us or discourage us or accuse us. Peter's answer for "the hope that is in us" is that Jesus died for us, was made alive, has gone in to the Father, the Father's presence, and is leading us to God himself. And that builds on things he's already told us back in chapter one verses 18 and 19, where he reminds us that we were ransomed from our former futile ways, sinful ways, with the precious blood of Christ. And in verse 21, that through Him we do have faith and hope in God, who raised Jesus from the dead and gave Him glory. He's building on this gospel message. We saw it in chapter 2 verses 24 and 25, after reminding us of how Jesus has left us an example in His own suffering, and how He entrusted Himself to God, who judges justly, Peter reminds us that Jesus also "*bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds [we] have been healed. [We] were straying like sheep, but now have returned to [our] Shepherd and Overseer.*" Peter's gospel takes these things together. It's a beautiful, simple description of the work of Jesus to save sinners. People like David in Psalm 32 who acknowledge their sin and seek God's forgiveness and receive it because of Jesus.

And again, Jesus leads us to God. He went into God's presence. And all those in him have that same hope that when we die, we will be made alive again and we will eventually enter into God's presence as well. We have that picture again in Hebrews of Jesus going behind the temple curtain into the Holy of Holies to lead us there with him. That very place where for centuries God was unseen. Tucked away. Only a priest could go there once a year. Hidden, so to speak, behind a thick curtain. Behind stout temple walls. Behind layers of courts in the outer temple and barriers that were set up. To that place Jesus now takes us. And we get to enter boldly. Not cowering. Not in fear. That's amazing grace. We sinners enter boldly into

God's presence because our sins have been washed away. Washed away by the blood of Jesus, as Peter's already told us.

Do you know this hope? Do you embrace that hope? If so, praise God. Do you not know this hope? Well, you may know it. You may believe it. You may trust in it by being honest about yourself. And that's hard to do. I have a master's degree in strategic planning. I worked with high-level executives on strategic plans and visions and blah, blah, blah. You know what the hardest thing for these people to do is? Admit the reality of where they are. If you want to go someplace, you got to know where you're starting from. And you got to be honest about it. We all do this, it's not just executives at big companies. No, I'm not really *this*, I'm over *here*. But you're not gonna get to *there*, because *this* is where you're starting from. You have to be honest. You have to be honest about yourself. And that means, again, admitting your sin, admitting it deserves punishment, and seeking God's forgiveness, which He freely offers, and is freely received as a gift from God, by grace, through faith in Christ Jesus. It changes things. Rather than having sin that you are eventually gonna have to answer for, you get to embrace the hope of Jesus, and in that, have a better answer: Peter's gospel.

Let me pray for us. Lord God, we pray and hope and trust that through your Word we have gained some clarity, some understanding in these somewhat perplexing things that our elder brother, Peter, has written to us. Give us wisdom as we deal with them. Give us wisdom as we apply them in our lives. But we thank you and praise you for who you are and what you've done for us in Christ Jesus. All this we lay up before you, in Jesus' name, amen.