



# PREACHING TO SPIRITS IN PRISON & BAPTISM THAT SAVES

**Additional Notes** for *Scattered Bible Study #9* (1 Peter 3:8-22)

## PREACHING TO SPIRITS IN PRISON

In 1 Peter 3:19 Peter writes that through the Spirit, Christ “went and preached to the spirits in prison ... in the days of Noah.” Apart from Peter, no other biblical writer makes obvious reference to this, so it can appear quite a strange statement. Not surprisingly, it has led to some odd interpretations. But as Peter gives no additional commentary, it is evident he thought this statement was clear to his readers – it was something he assumed they would understand without additional information.

That makes the starting point for readers the context in which Peter is writing: believers doing good among unbelievers who are maliciously opposing them and their message; and the parallel he draws to the same situation in Noah’s day. In both situations there is opposition, suffering and, through the lives and words of the righteous, a warning of judgement to come and a call to repentance.

- a. The first thing that needs to be resolved is whether the “spirits” are people or evil spirits, as some imagine.
  - i. There is no biblical evidence, much less any biblical logic, that would see God through his Spirit preaching repentance to evil spirits for whom there is no offer of salvation.
  - ii. In 2 Peter 2:4 Peter says that the rebellious angels are being held for judgement in chains in hell in gloomy darkness.” But there they already suffer the wrath of God – there is no escape for them from the final judgement they deserve that will compound what they already experience. There is no way preaching repentance to them can fit such a context.
  - iii. So those to whom the Spirit preaches are the spirits of people. Why not call them “people”? Because, until the return of Christ and the resurrection, they are people without bodies: they are only spirits. To Peter’s readers this would have been so obvious they would hardly have even taken a second look at it!

Then, working the passage back from verse 20, we see:

- b. He is not speaking about the 8 who were saved, so he is speaking about the unbelievers who were destroyed in the great judgement of the flood.
- c. With great patience over many years, God had been waiting for these unbelievers to repent. That implies they knew and were constantly presented with God’s call to righteousness and repentance. But Peter makes the preaching of Noah, implied here in 1 Peter 3:19, explicit in 2 Peter 2:5. Through Noah, they heard God’s call on their lives.

- d. In verse 19, there is no chronological sequence implied. That is, this preaching did not *follow* the resurrection. The point Peter is making is that the same Spirit that raised Christ from the dead is the Spirit who preached to the spirits who *are now* in “prison.”
- e. In verse 19, the Spirit did not preach to those who were in prison when he preached, but who are now (that is, in Peter’s day) imprisoned in hell. Getting this right is important: the verse doesn’t say he went to them in prison and preached, but that he preached to those who subsequently went to prison.
- f. Verse 19 also says that it is through the Spirit that Christ preached. That is no different from today: Christ proclaims righteousness, repentance, salvation and judgement today *by his Spirit*. Some people think Peter is indicating that in Noah’s day a theophany (that is, an actual pre-incarnation appearance of Christ in visible form) occurred in Noah’s day, in the same way that occasional appearances of “the Angel of the Lord” in the Old Testament can be understood. That may be, but it is not a necessary implication of this verse. Whenever, however, and through whomever Christ is proclaimed, it is always by his Spirit. Peter’s readers would have found nothing odd about this; nor should we. When Noah preached, Christ by his Spirit preached through Noah.
- g. The second part of verse 18 identifies the Holy Spirit, the One who brought Jesus to life after his crucifixion, as the Spirit who proclaimed repentance and judgement in Noah’s day. We should respond, “Of course. Who else?”

So Peter says that the same Spirit who raised Christ from the dead is the Spirit by whom repentance and faith were preached to unbelievers in Noah’s day.

Why introduce this at this point of his letter? Peter is giving the same message as that of Hebrews 2:1-4. To be saved, we must believe in Jesus who alone is the one who saves; and if we are saved we will bring forward fruits of repentance (Matthew 3:8). Without faith it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6). Works cannot save. But without works it is impossible to claim to have faith (James 2:14-26).

In this then, Peter is urging his readers to think about the judgement and salvation God brought in Noah’s day. Like Noah and his family, they (and we) can expect the wickedness around them (and us) to be overwhelmingly evident – even, in their case, bringing the believers of Peter’s day (and ours) into malicious, unjust opposition and great suffering. (Even though it is not stated in Genesis, it is hard to imagine that Noah and his family had it any easier in an age where God says *he* was grieved by the rampant wickedness he describes as “only evil continually.”)

In the face of this, *having their faith and salvation anchored in resurrected Christ with whom they are united*, he urges those same believers to clothe themselves with the uniform that belongs to every true believer, everyone truly united to Jesus: good.

## **BAPTISM THAT SAVES**

In 1 Peter 3:21 Peter declares that the water of the flood in Noah’s day “symbolises baptism that now saves you.” Many, including some prominent scholars and churches, mistakenly teach that this means baptism actually saves those who are baptised. But Peter has been very clear throughout this letter, and especially in this passage, that it is by Christ’s death and resurrection that God’s people are saved through faith. To confirm this, read verse 18 again. So clearly baptism cannot bring salvation from sin to righteousness. It cannot transform sinners from death to life. It make those once at enmity to God to being sons and daughters of God. Those blessings comes only through Christ by faith. So if baptism doesn’t save us in that sense, in what sense does it save us?

Peter makes this abundantly clear when he says that the baptism that saves doesn’t remove dirt from the body. By *that* symbolism he shows that baptism doesn’t save by removing sin from the soul. Rather, he says that baptism is a pledge, and symbol used by the Holy Spirit, to give believers a good

conscience before God. In this sense then, it “saves” those who are baptised – not by cleansing them but by reassuring them in graphic symbolism that God has cleansed them.

When a person is baptised, they act out both what God has done for them in Christ and their response in Christ. They have been united with Christ in his death and resurrection (Romans 6:4) and in response they publicly show their union with Christ in that death and resurrection, their union with Christians with whom they are made one in Christ, and their commitment to live for Christ (Romans 6:11-14). In the days and years to come, God uses that symbolism to remind believers that they have been cleansed of sin by Christ and given an eternal salvation in him. It is symbolism that has been chosen by God, in the same way that the bread and wine of the Lord’s supper have been chosen by God as symbols of Christ’s death and resurrection, not to impart cleansing, but to confirm to our consciences that we are one with Christ and made righteous forever in him. Though baptism doesn’t save us from eternal judgement, it does save us from doubt and fear and a questioning conscience. We look at our circumstances and perhaps doubt and fear set in: but our baptism says, no, we are Christ’s.

The comparison with the water that “saved” Noah and his family illustrates that point. The water didn’t save Noah. What saved Noah was his faith that led him to build the ark just as God had instructed. Then as Noah and his family floated safely on top of the waters of judgement, their consciences were assured that they were safe. Today, as believers are lifted up out of the water of baptism into which they were buried, the Spirit of God assures their consciences that they do indeed enjoy the benefits of everything symbolised in that baptism: perfect, finished cleansing in Christ, and Spirit-empowered newness of life in Christ. What the water *symbolises* – our union with Christ in his death and resurrection – does save us. Baptism is a symbol of that reality, and is a means by which God brings assurance to believers and refreshes our hope that the sufferings of this present age are indeed but for a moment, and will be replaced by the certain hope of an unblemished and perfect eternity with God.

#### **ABOUT “SCATTERED”**

*Scattered* is a series of Bible Studies that you can do alone at home, or with others in a group. They don't depend on a leader or someone affirming the right answer. The title of the series comes from Peter's addressing his letter to "*strangers in the world, scattered throughout*" the world. Christians will always be scattered in this world in all sorts of ways. Writing the series started during the Covid-19 lockdowns when we were as isolated as if we had been scattered. But Peter highlights the fact that it is our separation *to Christ* that separates *us from the world*. So he sees Christians as scattered strangers struggling in an alien world, and sets out to encourage us to live faithful and holy lives in Christ. The series is available (free) here: <https://www.michaeldrake.name/scattered>