

ELECT EXILES

“The Church’s Place in the World”

1 Peter 3:18-22

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Sunday, June 28, 2020 (Ordinary Time)

Scripture Reading

“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, 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, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. 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, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him” (1 Peter 3:18–22, ESV).

Introduction

One of my favorite works of world literature is *The Divine Comedy*, which was an epic poem written in the 1300s by the Italian poet Dante Alighieri. As a fictional, spiritual allegory, I think it is beautiful. Like C.S. Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia*, it is a symbolic story written to convey spiritual ideas through images and narrative. *The Divine Comedy* recounts a pilgrim’s journey through the various depths and layers of hell, which each represent sin and the suffering that comes from sin [show “Dante and Virgil” by Gustave Dore (1861)]. The pilgrim then climbs up a mountain called purgatory, which represents the refining fires of life’s trials. Finally, the pilgrim experiences the celestial radiance of heaven, which represents the fullness joy found only in the grace of God.

The only problem with a powerful story like Dante’s *Divine Comedy* is that many people do not read it like it is an allegory. It is not meant to be taken as a literal description of hell, heaven, or especially purgatory (which I do not believe exists). In other words, while it is a good thing for Christian to stories awaken our imaginations toward the things of God, we shouldn’t take our doctrine from Dante.

I'll give you an example. At one point in Dante's story, the pilgrim is traveling through hell; he notices a deep ravine.¹ The ravine was filled with shattered rocks that looked like the result of a massive earthquake or landslide. He stops for a moment and wonders at what could have caused this formation, and his guide tells him of a mighty hero who descended into hell to set free the great saints of the Old Testament era. The mere power and presence of this conquering king shook hell's ancient foundation until it broke.

As a Christian and a student of literature, I love this poetic image and how it captures the infinite power of Christ over the power of sin and death. But as a pastor and a student of the Bible, I feel like this story conveys a doctrine that is both very unbiblical and (unfortunately) very common – the doctrine of Christ's literal descent into hell [*"Descent to Hell" by Duccio (1311)*].

The reason I bring this up is that our Scripture reading today is the primary proof text for that this doctrine. Perhaps that's how you might even interpret this passage. But I want to spend our time today showing you how I believe that this text is showing us something completely different that will equip us as Christians to understand our place in the world.

Exposition

This is going to be a little bit of a different sermon, in which we will aim to accomplish two goals. Firstly, we are going to study this text, just as we always do. But secondly, I hope to model for you how to wrestle through a hard-to-understand passage like this.

We'll structure the rest of this sermon around some basic questions that any Christian should ask when he or she encounters a hard passage: 1.) *What does this passage mean?* 2.) *How does this passage fit into the message of the rest of the book (in this case, 1 Peter)?* And, finally, 3.) *What does this passage of Scripture mean for Christians today?*

1.) What does this passage mean?

This is a very difficult passage to understand and apply. So, if you were confused when I read the Scripture today, let me be the first to say, "Welcome to the club." In fact, this is what the great reformer and theologian Martin Luther had to say about this paragraph of Scripture: *"A wonderful text this is, 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.... I cannot understand and I cannot explain it."*²

I say that not to discourage us. But if we are going to understand this what this passage means, we're going to have to do some serious digging. We are going to have to work a

¹ Dante Alighieri. *The Divine Comedy Vol. 1: Inferno*. Trans. Mark Musa. (New York: Penguin, 1984), 99, 177-178.

² Martin Luther. *Commentary on Peter and Jude*, Quoted in David Helm *1 & 2 Peter and Jude: Sharing in Christ's Sufferings*. Preaching the Word commentary series. Ed. R. Kent Hughes. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 119.

little harder than we would in other parts of the Bible. But in Scripture, where there is great mystery, there is also often great reward. As the book of Proverbs says, *“It is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings is to search things out”* (Pr 25:2). It is good and godly to search diligently into the mysteries of Scripture. At Redeemer, this is one of the reasons we value preaching verse-by-verse through books of the Bible. It requires us to confront challenging passages like this one. It requires us to peer deeply into God’s precious word.

So, let’s take a closer look: *“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”* (1 Pt 3:18). So far so good, we’re just talking about Jesus dying on the cross and rising from the grave. But then things go off the rails in verse 19. Christ was put to death in the flesh and 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, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water”* (1 Pt 3:19-20).

This is the confusing part. *Christ is preaching or proclaiming (ἐκήρυξεν,)*, but to whom is he preaching? When is he preaching? Where is he preaching? And why is he preaching?

Dante the poet, the Roman Catholic Church, and many Christians believe that, after Jesus died on the cross – but before he rose again from the grave – a ghost version of Jesus descended into hell where he preached the good news of salvation to the Old Testament saints – people like Abraham, Moses, and King David. Then, when these saints believed in the gospel, Jesus delivered them from imprisonment in hell, and took them into heaven. This notion of Christ’s literally descent into hell was even enshrined in later versions of the Apostles’ Creed. However, it is notable that this phrase was not included in the earliest versions of the Apostles’ Creed.³

But when you begin to look closely at this passage, this interpretation begins to unravel. First of all, the people to whom Jesus is preaching are people who *“formerly did not obey”* God. Peter doesn’t sound like he is talking about Old Testament saints to me. He sounds like he is talking about ungodly people.

Some might say, well then, “Maybe Jesus descended into hell to proclaim his victory over demons and disobedient people; kind of like a victory lap.” But even if he were preaching to disobedient people (which is what our text says), why would he descend into hell to preach only to the people who were alive during *“the days of Noah”* (as in Noah the Old Testament character in Genesis who built an ark and survived a flood) [*“Noah’s Ark on Mount Ararat”* by Simon de Myle (1570)]?

³ The earliest version of the Apostles’ Creed is found in the “Interrogatory Creed of Hippolytus” (c. 215), which notably does not contain any reference to the descent to hell. The first mention of the descent to hell is in the “Creed of Rufinus (Aquileia)” (c. 404). The current version of the Apostles’ creed was not formalized until the sixth or seventh century. See *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*. Ed. John H. Leith. Revised Edition. (Richmond, VA.: John Knox Press, 1963, 1973), 22-25.

Another problem with this view is the assumption that Jesus's spirit went into hell after his death on the cross and before his resurrection. Does the Bible elsewhere ever refer to Jesus traveling to hell after his death on the cross? No. It doesn't. In fact, the only time the Bible ever directly refers to what Jesus was doing in between his death and resurrection, is when Jesus speaks to one of the thieves who was crucified next to him on the cross. And do you remember what Jesus said to him? He said, *"Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Lk 23:43)*. So, unless Jesus's spirit booked a flight on *American Eagle* and his itinerary got really messed up, Jesus never went to hell in the first place. He went to Paradise the very day he died.

So, I believe and I submit to you that this very common interpretation of this passage is wrong. I do not believe Christ's literal descent into hell is something the Bible teaches.

But that doesn't let us off the hook. Now that we know what the Bible is *not* saying, we still need to ask what the Bible *is* saying in this passage. The best place to start is by letting Scripture interpret Scripture. And again, when you run into a hard-to-understand part of the Bible, you can use this same tool as a starting place.

So let's take our first confusing phrase at the end of verse 18 and the beginning of verse 19, *"Christ...being made alive in the Spirit, in which he went and proclaimed."* Now is there anywhere else in the Bible that uses these same concepts and language? Could we look elsewhere in Scripture to illuminate the meaning of this passage in 1 Peter 3? As it turns out, yes, there is a passage that uses this kind of language, and, in fact, it happens to be in the first chapter of 1 Peter itself! Remember, we are looking for terms like "Christ," "Spirit," and "preaching/proclamation."

This is 1 Peter 1:10-12: *"Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time **the Spirit of Christ in them** was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those **who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.**"* In 1 Peter 1, the phrase "Spirit of Christ" refers to the Holy Spirit. Here the Holy Spirit is working in and through the Old Testament prophets as well as the New Testament apostles as *they* preach the gospel.

So, with that in mind, when we look back at 1 Peter 3, when Christ is proclaiming in "the Spirit," he is proclaiming a message in and through and by his Holy Spirit; the same Holy Spirit that rose Jesus from the dead at the resurrection.

How and when and why is Jesus doing this? It is my opinion, as well as the opinion theologians like St. Augustine of Hippo, that in this passage, *Peter is stating that the Spirit of Christ (also known as the Holy Spirit) preached a message of righteousness and repentance through Noah to a surrounding culture that was imprisoned in sin and*

death [*“The Building of Noah's Ark” by an unnamed French Master (1675)*].⁴ Likewise, Peter mentions how Noah's surrounding culture ultimately endured God's judgment, but Noah's small family was saved through the ark. *Noah's family being alienated by the world but placed in the ark for salvation is a picture of the Church being alienated by the world but baptized into Christ for salvation.*

This is what this passage means.

2.) How does this passage fit into the rest of 1 Peter?

So, if Peter is saying that the Spirit of Christ proclaimed a message of righteousness and repentance to the generation of people alive at the same time as Noah through Noah, how does that fit into the rest of the message being taught in 1 Peter? I would argue that this interpretation fits easily and naturally into the message of 1 Peter, whereas a teaching about a supposed “literal descent into hell” seems to come out of nowhere.

In this New Testament letter, Peter is writing to Christians in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) who are beginning to experience persecution by their surrounding culture. Peter calls these Christians “elect exiles” (1 Pt 1:1). They are “elect” – chosen and loved by God in his free grace. But they are “exiles” – citizens of a heavenly kingdom that is not of this world. Peter has been instructing these “elect exiles” to be prepared to suffer for the sake of the gospel. He has told them to live counter-culturally by engaging the government, the workplace, and the institution of marriage in a distinctly Christian way, even when surrounding culture rejects their message. He has taught them to defend the gospel, but to do so with “gentleness and respect” (1 Pt 3:15).

But what if society only continues to reject Christianity? What if things get worse and not better for people of faith? What if society mocks us? It is in answering these questions that Peter uses the analogy of Noah to comfort his readers. And this is a brilliant move.

It was a common belief then, as it is now, that (after the flood) Noah's Ark had come to rest in Asia Minor/Turkey, which is where Peter's readers live.⁵ He is intentionally using a story very familiar with his audience. But more than that, Peter is using a biblical illustration that Jesus himself used concerning how the culture of the world will often ignore and mock the idea of the kingdom of God. This is Jesus speaking in the Gospel of Matthew: *“For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man” (Mt 24:37-39).*

⁴ Wayne A. Grudem, *1 Peter: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 17, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 214.

⁵ N.T. Wright. *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone: James, Peter, John, and Judah*. (Louisville: WJK, 2011), 82.

And if you were a Christian living in Asia Minor during the first century, you would have immediately understood how Noah's culture compared to your culture. In Noah's day, Noah's family was a believing minority. In the same way, as "elect exiles," Christians are a believing minority. Noah and his family were called to be righteousness in the midst of the unbelieving world. So too Peter is calling Christians to be righteous in the midst of an unbelieving world. Noah witnessed with boldness and courage to his surrounding culture. So too Peter calls Christians to witness with boldness and courage to their surrounding culture. As Noah's family was saved from the judgment of the flood by entering into the Ark by faith, Peter calls his readers to enter Christ by faith in baptism so that we, too, might be saved.⁶ As verse 21 says: *"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" (1 Pt. 3:21).*

Now, this final analogy of the Noah's ark and the baptism is fascinating and deep. Dr. Wayne A. Grudem fleshes out this analogy in his commentary: *"The water of baptism is like waters of judgment – similar to the waters of the flood, and showing clearly what we deserve for our sins. Coming up out of the water corresponds to being kept safe through the waters of the flood, the waters of God's judgment on sin, and emerging to live in 'newness of life' (cf. Rom. 6:4). Baptism thus shows us clearly that in one sense we have 'died' and 'been raised' again, but in another sense we emerge from the waters knowing that we are still alive and have passed through the waters of God's judgment unharmed. As Noah fled into the ark, so we flee to Christ, and in him we escape judgment."*⁷

So now that we have done all the hard work to figure out what this paragraph means, and how it fits into 1 Peter, we must ask the most important question.

3.) What does this passage of Scripture mean for Christians today?

Now, we do not live in a culture of intense persecution like what the early church saw, or even like what our Christian brothers and sisters elsewhere in the world are facing right now. But we do live in an age in which the surrounding culture is increasingly beginning to mistrust and malign biblical Christianity. We do live in an age in which our faith is mocked *eagerly and often*. We are beginning to see a glimpse of what it means to be "elect exiles" (1 Pt 1:1).

And as "elect exiles," some of you may be asking, "What if things don't get better? What if society only begins to reject Christians more and more?"

Scriptural passages like the one before us are meant to rightly form our expectations of the church's place in the world. We should not expect to be a moral majority that will force the kingdom of God to come through our political might. Rather, like Noah's

⁶ Grudem, 168-169.

⁷ Ibid., 171.

family, we should expect to be “a prophetic minority.”⁸ We should expect to be a people who live on the fringes of what is popular, celebrated, and accepted.

The existence of the church is an embarrassment to polite, enlightened society. We submit our lives to a book that is thousands of years old. We gather week after week to sing songs to a God we cannot see and eat a meal that represents his flesh and blood. We believe that one-day a Jewish man who died on a Roman cross 2000 years ago will one day return on a white horse. *To the outside world, we are crazy. We are like a deranged old man building a boat in a desert land that has never seen rain.*

So yes, we should expect to be rejected by culture. Yes, we should expect to be misunderstood. But we should not despair. Peter writes this paragraph to encourage his readers by also reminding them of the final outcome.⁹ He concludes with the triumphant hope of “...Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him” (1 Pt 3:21b-22).

The church is the body of Christ filled with the Spirit of Christ to continue the mission of Christ. As the body of Christ, we can expect the same humiliation that our Lord suffered in his life and death. But the good news is – for those who are in Christ – we can also expect the exaltation of his resurrection and eternal reign. We can live with unflinching hope in his final victory and our final vindication.

Conclusion

So, Redeemer Christian Church, like Noah, may we see ourselves as a people who see something that the rest of the world does not. With the eyes of faith, may we long for the kingdom of God that is surely coming. May we hope in the day in which he will wipe away every tear, end the power of death, and make all things new (cf. Rev 21:4-5).

AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities

1.) *1 Peter 3:22-28 is a very difficult passage to understand. Why is it important for Christians to still try to understand challenging passages of the Bible? How should Christians approach this task?*

2.) *What similarities can we draw between our culture and the culture at the time of Noah?*

⁸ Russell D Moore. *Onward: Engaging the Culture without Losing the Gospel*. (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 29.

⁹ David R. Helm. *1 & 2 Peter and Jude: Sharing in Christ's Sufferings*. Preaching the Word commentary series. Ed. R. Kent Hughes. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 121-122.

3.) Noah and his family were a “prophetic minority” in their culture. In what ways is the church supposed to be a “prophetic minority” in today’s culture? How should this look for the church and individual Christians?

4.) How should 1 Pt. 3:22 encourage Christians who may be suffering rejection from culture?

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