

1 Peter 3:18–22

Introduction

Peter has been exhorting us never to be afraid of those who would persecute or mistreat us—never to live in fear of suffering for righteousness' sake—but rather, in our hearts, to sanctify Christ as Lord. To sanctify Christ as Lord is to be bowing down before Him, confessing Him as *my* King—and not only as *my* King, but also as the sovereign ruler over all creation and over all the world. We saw last week that when we do this there's no longer any room in our hearts for fear, and now we can be always ready to make a defense to anyone who demands from us an accounting for the hope that is in us.

So now we come to a very, very important question: How do we—in our hearts—sanctify Christ as Lord? Peter answers this question very powerfully in verses 18-22.

I. 1 Peter 3:18a — For Christ also suffered...

In chapter two, Peter set before us the pattern of Christ's sufferings as an example to be reproduced in our own lives.

- 1 Peter 2:20–23 — What credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ *also* suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.

Now, here in chapter three, Peter once again wants us to see any sufferings of our own in light of the sufferings of Christ: “It is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil. For Christ also suffered...” (17-18a) But this time, Peter's point is different. In chapter two, the emphasis was on Jesus' response to sufferings and how we are to respond in the same way. But here in chapter three, Peter's emphasis is on the sufferings of Christ as something totally unique – something that's unrepeatable and can never, ever be copied by us.

II. 1 Peter 3:18b — For Christ also suffered *once* for sins, the righteous *for the unrighteous*, that he might *bring you to God*...

The first key to truly, in our hearts, sanctifying Christ as Lord is that we must be diligently believing and meditating on the infinite, saving value of Christ's sufferings for us. When Peter says that Christ suffered “for sins,” he uses language that refers in the Old Testament to the *sacrificial offerings* “for sin.”

- Leviticus 5:6–7 (LXX) — He shall bring for his transgressions against the Lord, **for his sin** which he has sinned, a ewe lamb of the flock... and the priest shall make an atonement for him **for his sin** which he has sinned, and his sin shall be forgiven him.

And so now we come to see Christ's suffering and death in the light of these animals offered up on the altar. His suffering (which includes, here, His death) was not the same thing as the

suffering and death that countless others have experienced. His suffering and His death was unique; it was a sacrificial offering *for* sins—for our sins. But unlike the daily sacrifices of animals on the altar, Peter says that Christ suffered “once”—or we might say, “once for all” [Heb. 7:27; 9:26; 10:10]—the righteous for the unrighteous [which is what we all were], that he might bring [*us*] to God” – that he might reconcile us to God and give us full and unhindered access to God. This is the infinite, saving value of Christ’s sufferings for us.

If we would truly, in our hearts, sanctify Christ as Lord, then this is where it starts. We must be diligently believing and meditating on *these* sufferings of Christ for us—and for our sins. But what does the suffering of Christ **for us** have to do with his Lordship **over the entire universe**?

III. 1 Peter 3:18c — For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring you to God, **being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the Spirit...**

Some will say that the resurrection is an impossibility, but if Christ’s death is what the Old and New Testament Scriptures say it is—if it’s what Peter says it is here—then what’s actually impossible is that He should not be raised from the dead. With Christ, it’s not just that death was followed by resurrection, but that His death required the resurrection – it was the infinite, saving value of His death that actually made the resurrection inevitable. This is why these two realities can never finally be separated in our thinking. And so the second key to truly, in our hearts, sanctifying Christ as Lord is to be diligently believing and meditating on the saving power of that resurrection life that Christ is living now. Do we ever think about this? And are we earnestly believing this?

Peter says that Jesus was put to death “in the flesh” but made alive “in the Spirit.” In the New Testament, whenever Spirit/spirit is contrasted with flesh, flesh isn’t referring to something physical or bodily. Instead, the “flesh” is just our earthly, mortal existence with all of its weaknesses and limitations, and especially our final vulnerability to suffering and death. Now what this means for us is that the flesh also assumes our fallenness and our sinfulness. In the Bible the flesh and our sin nature are really the same thing. But in the case of Jesus, He was without any sin, and yet He still came not just in the body, but even “in the flesh.” He was without sin, and yet He still lived a true earthly, mortal life, subject to all of its weaknesses and limitations, and even finally capable of experiencing true suffering and death. So it wasn’t just Jesus’ physical body that made Him subject to death, but His real existence in the realm of the flesh.

Now maybe we can understand the contrast that Peter is setting up: He was “put to death in the flesh but made alive in the Spirit.” If flesh is the realm of weakness, and frailty, and mortality, and death, then what is “Spirit”? “Spirit” is the realm of power, and glory, and immortality, and life. (cf. Michaels) What Peter’s reminding us of is that Christ *has* been **physically and bodily** raised from the dead, yes, but not at all to the same kind of existence that he had before — not to life “in the flesh,” but to a wholly new kind of existence lived out in a wholly different realm. Christ has been raised to a life that partakes only of immortality, and power, and glory, a life now lived wholly in the realm of the supernatural and all-powerful Spirit of God. (cf. 2 Cor. 13:4a)

The second key to truly, in our hearts, sanctifying Christ as Lord is to be diligently believing and meditating on the saving power of this resurrection life that Christ is living now. So now Peter goes on to describe this saving power of the life that Christ is living no longer in the realm of flesh, but in the realm of Spirit.

IV. 1 Peter 3:19–20a — [He was] put to death in the flesh but made alive in the Spirit, **in which he also 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...**

Throughout history, there have been many interpretations of these verses. One group of interpretations says that in that short time between His death and His resurrection, while His body was still in the grave, the spirit of Jesus descended into hell and preached to the spirits of human beings who had lived during the days of Noah. Another major interpretation is that the preincarnate Spirit of Christ was preaching through Noah in the days before the flood.

But there are several huge problems with both of these interpretations. First of all, “spirits” refers most naturally not to the disembodied spirits of human beings¹ but rather to “spirits” – as in angelic or demonic beings.

- Hebrews 1:13–14 — To which of the angels has he ever said, “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet”? Are they not all ministering **spirits**...?
- Matthew 8:16 (cf. Mk. 9:17) — They brought to [Jesus] many who were oppressed by demons, and he cast out **the spirits** with a word.
- Luke 10:20 (cf. 9:39; Acts 23:9) — Do not rejoice in this, that **the spirits** are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.

Second of all, the spirits of the dead are nowhere else pictured as being imprisoned, but evil “spirit beings” are:

- 2 Peter 2:4 (cf. Jude 6; Rev. 20:7) — God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment.

Reall, the most important thing for us to ask ourselves is what Peter means by those two words, “**in which.**” “[He was] put to death in the flesh but **made alive in the Spirit, in which** he also went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison.” When Jesus went and made proclamation to the spirits in prison, this was a manifestation of the power and glory of His **resurrection** life – His life in the Spirit. In other words, the point here is not the preincarnate Christ preaching through Noah, or the disembodied spirit of Jesus preaching in hell while His body still lay in the grave, but rather the preaching of the resurrected Christ who lives now wholly in the realm of the supernatural and all-powerful Spirit of God. And so what do you think is the message of this resurrected Christ? He must be proclaiming to all the powers of evil His final victory and triumph over them. He’s announcing to them that in and through the power and glory of His

¹ When used with reference to humans, “spirits” usually, if not always, refers to living, flesh and blood human beings; or else it is explicitly qualified (never used absolutely, as here; e.g. Peter doesn’t say: the spirits of those...). (cf. 1 Cor. 14:32; Heb. 12:9, 23; Rev. 22:6)

resurrection life their ultimate doom has now been sealed forever.² This isn't just empty doctrine, but actual living reality and truth.

But why these specific “spirits?” Why the “spirits [who are] in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared...”? I can’t preach a sermon this morning on Genesis chapter six verses 1-5, but if you’d like to see the sermon I did preach on this a long time ago, you can let me know and I’ll send you a copy. For right now, I’m just going to assume the conclusion that I came to in that sermon, and that I believe is also supported here in 1 Peter, and also in 2 Peter (2:4) and in Jude (6).

- Genesis 6:1–5 — When man began to multiply on the face of the land and daughters were born to them, the sons of God [angelic beings] saw that the daughters of man [human women] were attractive. And they [the angelic beings in human form or inhabiting human bodies] took as their wives any they chose. [In giving their daughters to these spirit beings, men were perhaps seeking to gain the power and unending “life” that these spirit beings possessed.] Then the LORD said, “My Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years.” The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of man and they bore children to them. These were the mighty men who were of old, the men of renown. The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

Notice how in Genesis 6, the wickedness of humans is tied together with the disobedience of a specific group of angelic beings. The emphasis in Genesis is on the wickedness of the humans, and so we have the judgment of the flood. But, of course, the humans weren't the only ones that sinned – so, also, did the angels. So a tradition developed in Judaism which said that these specific angels (or their spirit offspring) were also judged and put in prison until the final judgment. (cf. 1 Enoch) There's a whole lot about this tradition that's probably not true, but some of it, apparently, *was* rooted in truth. So, it's with Genesis 6 in mind (cf. Green) that Jude writes:

- Jude 6 (cf. 2 Pet. 2:4) — 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.

Peter is also assuming the background of the spirits in Genesis six who cohabited with human women. Only now we learn something entirely new— that it was to these imprisoned spirits that Christ went in the full power and glory of His new resurrection life to proclaim His victory over them and the sealing of their final doom.

² The Greek word for “proclaim” (*kerysso*) almost always refers to the proclamation of the Gospel in the New Testament. However, in all other places where this is the case, the Gospel content of the message is clearly specified (cf. Mat. 4:17, 23). Here, there is no Gospel content specified. Also, Peter elsewhere uses the Greek word, *euangelizo*, to refer to the preaching of the Gospel (cf. 1:12, 25; 4:6). There are clear examples of *kerysso* referring to something other than the proclamation of the Gospel. (cf. Luke 12:3; Rev. 5:2; Rom. 2:21; Gal. 5:11)

So now maybe we can answer the question, “Why these spirits specifically?” If the human generation of Noah’s day was among the most evil and depraved that have ever existed, then these spirits that were imprisoned long before the final judgment must have also been among the most evil and wicked—and perhaps also the most mighty and powerful—of their kind. Therefore, in announcing his victory over them, Christ is announcing His victory over **ALL** the powers of darkness and evil.

But I think there’s another reason that Peter chooses to emphasize these spirits in particular, and it will help us better appreciate how these verses are still speaking powerfully to us today.

V. 1 Peter 3:20b — [Christ was] *put to death in the flesh* but *made alive in the Spirit, IN WHICH* he also 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 saved through water.**

All of a sudden, Peter leaves aside the imprisoned spirits from the days of Noah and moves to the human side. He assumes that we’re familiar not only with the disobedience of the angels, but also with the wickedness of all the human beings who ended up being destroyed in the flood. For Peter, Genesis 6 is a perfect illustration of how always behind the evil and wickedness of men, there’s the motivating, instigating activity of the spiritual powers of darkness. The Apostle Paul says:

➤ Ephesians 6:12 — We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

In fact, for Peter, there’s not only a connection between the wickedness of evil spirits and humans, but also between God’s judgment of evil spirits and humans. The judgment of the one assumes the judgment of the other – the time of the flood was also the time when the spirits were imprisoned. And so the Bible paints a picture of a connection between the evil and the punishment of the invisible world and the evil and the punishment of the visible world.

And now it’s against all this backdrop of evil and judgment that the salvation of righteous Noah and his tiny family of eight stands out in such awesome relief. Why was God so patient in the face of so much evil? It was because He had purposed to save Noah and his family (just eight people). All those years that the ark was being prepared, God waited and postponed His judgment. And in the end, the very waters that brought death and destruction to everyone else were actually the means of righteous Noah’s deliverance. Yes, God saved Noah from the flood by means of the ark, but he actually delivered Noah from all the evil and wickedness of the world that he lived in by means of the flood (He saved him “through [the] water”). Are you beginning to see a parallel with the Christians that Peter was writing to? They, too, were a small minority living as sojourners and foreigners in an evil and often hostile world – just like Noah before the flood. And now just like Noah was saved from his evil and wicked generation through water, so they have been saved in the same way – through water.

VI. 1 Peter 3:21a — This [water] (or baptism, which corresponds to it) now saves you³...

Peter says that the water of the flood is now also *our* salvation. Well, not technically. Actually, what saves us today is the water of baptism which Peter says *corresponds* to the waters of the flood.

What does the water of baptism have to do with the water of the flood? In the water of baptism and our immersion in it, we have a picture of our passing with Christ safely through death and judgment and all the wrath of God poured out—even dying ourselves with Christ only so that we might be raised with Him to a wholly new existence, no longer only “in the flesh” but sharing even now ourselves in the power and the glory of His life “in the Spirit.” And so we see that we can identify with Noah not only as a righteous minority living in an evil and often hostile world, but also as a people who are saved from this evil and hostile world also through water. “This water (or baptism, which corresponds to this water) now saves *YOU*...

But now Peter clarifies:

VII. 1 Peter 3:21b — (not a removal of dirt from the body,⁴ but a response of faith⁵ to God out of⁶ a good conscience)

What is it that saves us? It’s not the water of baptism in and of itself. The only thing the actual physical water of baptism could ever do is wash dirt off our bodies. Baptism is an outward sign and seal of the good conscience and the clean hearts that God has given to us as a free gift. At the same time, baptism is also the formal and concrete expression of our faith which flows out of the

³ In the Greek, “you” (*hymas*) stands in an emphatic position at the beginning of this clause (“This [water] also *you*...”)

⁴ Literal translation: “not a putting off of the filth of the flesh.” Michaels argues at length that Peter is referring here to the moral defilements of the flesh. In spite of the significant weight of his arguments, I am compelled to agree with Achtemeier and Schreiner (cf. Davids, Watson, Blum, and also the majority—if not all—of the translations): “To understand ‘filth of the flesh’ not in a physical but in a moral sense, that is, as moral impurity, is then to affirm that our author divorced such cleansing from moral impurity from the rite of baptism—that is after all what our author says baptism is not—a *point difficult to credit*.” (Achtemeier)

“Elsewhere baptism is connected with the cleansing and removal of sin (cf. Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3; Acts 2:38; Eph 5:26; Titus 3:5). It would be *strange indeed* if baptism did not represent cleansing from moral impurity.” (Schreiner)

⁵ This Greek noun (*eperotema*), which translate here “response of faith” appears nowhere else in the New Testament or the Greek Old Testament. The only way to establish its meaning, then, is either to appeal to the meaning of the cognate verb (*epwtaw*) which means to ask/inquire (cf. Schreiner; ESV; NASB; NRSV), or to appeal to the meaning of this noun used outside the Scriptures where it seems to have the sense of a formal pledge/contract/resolution. (cf. Michaels; Davids; Blum; Watson; Achtemeier; Jobes; NIV; HCSB; NET; NCV; NLT; NKJV) I agree with Michaels, who points out that if the appeal/pledge is “out of” a good conscience (rather than something looking forward to a good conscience; subjective genitive versus objective genitive), then the difference in meaning is not nearly as significant. In fact, in this particular context, the two possible “meanings” of this word might even begin shading into one another as simply two possible descriptions of the activity or outward manifestation of faith flowing out of God’s prior, sovereign work of grace.

⁶ Cf. Michaels; Davids; Watson; NLT; NCV; NKJV (contra Schreiner; ESV; NASB; NRSV). Other translations leave intact the ambiguity of the Greek grammar (NIV; HCSB). It seems that Peter puts the words “of a good conscience” in the emphatic first position (Greek: “but of a good conscience a pledge/appeal to God”) in order to highlight the contrast between the external “flesh” and the internal “conscience.”

good conscience and the clean heart that God has given to us. (cf. Blum) So in his sermon at Pentecost, Peter says:

- Acts 2:38 — Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

And in Acts 22, Ananias says to Paul:

- Acts 22:16 — Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.

So, it's in this way that just like Noah and his family we, too, are saved "through water" – **not just** from sin and death, but saved even from this hostile world in which we live. (cf. 2 Tim. 4:16-18; Phil. 1:27-30; 1 Pet. 5:8-11) We know Peter's thinking of our rescue and deliverance from the evil and hostile powers of this world because of how he returns now to where he started – because of how he picks up again, now, right where we left off.

VIII. 1 Peter 3:21c — This [water] (or baptism, which corresponds to it) now saves **YOU... through the resurrection of Jesus Christ...**

We already know, now, what this resurrection is, don't we? Christ has been raised not to the same kind of existence that he had before—not to life "in the flesh"—but to a wholly new kind of existence lived out in a wholly different realm. Christ has been raised to a life that partakes only of immortality, and power, and glory – a life now lived wholly in the realm of the supernatural and all-powerful Spirit of God. Therefore, it's through *His* resurrection that we are saved from all the evil and hostile powers of this world.

How is this true? How is this **really true**? We already know that it was in the power and glory of His resurrection life that Christ "went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison" His final victory and triumph over them. We've seen from the story of Noah how it's the invisible powers of darkness that always stand behind the world and its persecution and mistreatment of God's people. We've seen from the story of Noah how, long ago, God saved a small remnant from the evil and wickedness of the world "through water." We've seen how we, too, have passed through this "same" water in our baptism so that we share—even now—in all the saving power and glory of Christ's resurrection life. All that remains, now, is for Peter to remind us again of what this saving power is. In verse 19, Peter said that Christ "**went [poreuomai]** and proclaimed to the spirits in prison." Now Peter picks up in his conclusion with this same word:

IX. 1 Peter 3:22 — This [water] (or baptism, which corresponds to it) now saves **YOU...** through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, **who went [poreuomai] into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected TO HIM.**

Brothers and sisters, here is the lordship of Christ. This isn't just empty doctrine, but actual living reality and truth. Peter's message to us is this: Whatever persecution or mistreatment we may ever endure for the sake of righteousness, we know that this can never be the final word. How do we know this? **Because** in our hearts we have sanctified Christ as Lord. **Because**, like Noah, we've passed through the waters in our baptism so that we might live with Christ – so that

through His lordship over all the powers of darkness and evil in this world, *we* might also be rescued and delivered from these same powers that are still at work in this world. How do we know that suffering and persecution can never be the final word? **Because** we know that the God who waited in the days of Noah to save only a few, that is, eight persons, through water, is the same God who today has already worked in Christ to save and deliver us.

He who suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us to God— He who was put to death in the flesh and made alive in the Spirit— who also went and proclaimed to the spirits now in prison— who went into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to Him— **HE is LORD over all**. May this truly be the constant, reverent and joyful confession of our hearts. In our hearts, may we always sanctify Christ as Lord.