

**BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #112:  
DID CHRIST PREACH THE GOSPEL  
TO WICKED SPIRITS IN HADES?  
By John Temples**

1 Peter 3:18-20 is a mysterious passage. It reads:

“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water.”

From this passage, many people have concluded that during the three days between Christ’s death and resurrection, He personally preached to the spirits of pre-flood people in Hades, the dwelling place of the spirits of the dead; and He offered them a second chance for salvation.

To draw these conclusions, several assumptions must be made:

- Assumption #1: Christ (His spirit) was in Hades, the prejudgment realm of the dead, during the three days between His death and resurrection. TRUE (see Acts 2:31).
- Assumption #2: The preaching was done during those three days. NOT SPECIFICALLY STATED.
- Assumption #3: The preaching was done by Jesus personally. NOT SPECIFICALLY STATED.<sup>1</sup>
- Assumption #4: The subject of the preaching was an offer of salvation--release from spirit prison. NOT SPECIFICALLY STATED.

There are two important principles of Biblical interpretation which are especially relevant to an understanding of 1 Peter 3:18-20. They are:

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<sup>1</sup> The text says that Christ preached “in” or “by the agency of” the Spirit. This suggests that the preaching was not done personally, but through a representative or agent. See the following discussion.

- A difficult passage, if correctly interpreted, must agree with all other pertinent passages.
- A correct understanding of Scripture requires using clear passages to explain unclear passages. (1 Peter 3:18-20 certainly qualifies as an unclear passage.)

Based on these two principles, the popular interpretation--that the Lord offered the spirits of pre-flood sinners a chance for pardon--cannot be correct.

## PROBLEMS WITH THE POPULAR VIEW

*For one thing, it has Christ in the wrong part of Hades.* Remember, Luke 23:43 says that at His death, Christ's spirit went to Paradise, the part of Hades where the spirits of the righteous reside. "The spirits in prison" are in the other part of Hades, the place of wicked spirits. There is no affirmation in this passage or any other that Jesus ever went personally into the "spirit prison" side of Hades. Furthermore, Luke 16:26 tells us that there is a "great gulf" between the two parts of Hades, and this gulf is "fixed"--it can never be crossed.

*For another thing, the popular view makes the Lord a respecter of persons.* Why would Christ offer a second chance to only the sinners of Noah's day--why not to all the wicked? Acts 10:34-35 says, "God shows no partiality [is no respecter of persons, KJV], but in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him." If the Lord did preach to any spirits in Hades, He would have to have preached to all of them, not just the pre-flood people.

*Also, the popular view violates the ironclad Scriptural principle that death is an irreversible, final state.* There will be no opportunity after death for anyone to repent and change his destiny. "It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment" (Hebrews 9:27). 2 Cor 5:10 says, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad."

## SO WHAT DOES 1 PETER 3:18-20 MEAN?

The truth is, yes, Jesus did preach “in spirit” to the wicked people who lived before the Flood. But He did not do the preaching in person. The phrase “in spirit” implies that He did it representatively, through an agent. Have you ever told somebody, “I can’t be present, but I’m with you *in spirit*”? You meant that you could not be physically present but you approved of whatever action might be taken. Paul used a similar expression in 1 Corinthians 5:3 in reference to a sinning church member. He told the Corinthian church, “For I indeed, *as absent in body but present in spirit*, have already judged (as though I were present) him who has so done this deed.”

Another consideration is when the preaching was done. Since the dead cannot change their destiny, preaching to them in Hades would be pointless. But it would have availed while the people were alive, before the Flood; and that is what 1 Peter 3:18-20 affirms. Notice the tenses of the verbs in verses 19 and 20:

- “He went and preached”--past tense.
- “To the spirits in prison”--to those who are now in prison (present tense).
- The NASB renders verse 19, “in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison.”

Verse 20 tells us exactly when the preaching was done: “...when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah...while the ark was being prepared.”

## WHO DID THE PREACHING?

If Christ did not personally preach to wicked spirits in Hades, who did? Who would have been around at the time, a man in whom the Spirit of Christ dwelled, who was a preacher? The answer is found in 2 Peter 2:5: “God did not spare the ancient world, but saved Noah, one of eight people, **a preacher of righteousness**, bringing in the Flood on the world of the ungodly.”

Except for the time He was in the world, Christ has always preached “in spirit”-- indirectly, through human agents. He preached through prophets during the Old Testament period, and through His apostles in the first century. 1 Peter 1:11 affirms that the spirit of Christ was in the Old Testament prophets as they preached. In the same sense, the spirit of Christ was in Noah as he preached to his contemporaries.

BUT IF THIS IS CORRECT, WHY DOES IT SAY “CHRIST **WENT** AND PREACHED TO THE SPIRITS IN PRISON?”

The answer is that not every “coming” (or going) of Christ in Scripture was literal or physical. Several times in the Bible record, the Lord is said to “come” or “go” to certain people; but the going was done figuratively or through an agent. Note:

- John 14:23 says, “Jesus answered and said to him, If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and **we will come to him** and make our home with him.” Everyone understands that this is a figurative coming, not a literal one.
- In Ephesians 2:17 Paul, speaking to Gentile Christians, says, “And He [Christ] **came** and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near.” This was not a literal coming--Christ came and preached to these people through Paul.
- In Revelation 2:5, the Lord told the church at Ephesus that if they did not straighten up and return to their first love, He would “come to them” and “remove their lampstand.” We have no record that He did that personally.

Brother Burton Coffman says: “‘He went and preached’ is just a Biblical way of saying ‘he preached’.... Speaking of the preaching of the apostles themselves, Paul said that Christ ‘came and preached peace to you that were afar off’ (Eph 2:17); but Christ preached to the Ephesians through human instruments, nevertheless it is said that he ‘came and preached’ to them. Therefore, If Christ is said by Paul to go and do what he did by his apostles, Christ may with equal propriety be said by Peter to go and do what he did by Noah.”

## WHAT ABOUT 1 PETER 4:6?

Those who espouse the second-chance view point to 1 Peter 4:6 as confirmation for their theory. It reads, "For this reason the gospel was preached also to those who are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit." Many people assume that this verse is speaking of the same occasion as 3:19, drawing the conclusion that Christ preached the gospel of salvation to the spirits of pre-flood sinners in Hades. But we're dealing with two different time frames and two different groups of dead people. The ones preached to in 3:19 were wicked sinners who were alive in the days of Noah and are now in spirit prison. The ones preached to in 4:6 are said to be "alive to God in the spirit," which could not possibly describe not wicked sinners. Furthermore, what was preached to the ones in 4:6 while they were alive was "the gospel." "The gospel" in the New Testament always means the good news of Christ.

So who are the subjects of 4:6? Most likely, they were righteous first-century Christians who died for their faith. They were described as having been "judged according to men in the flesh" (they died as martyrs) but "live to God in the spirit" (they are at rest in Paradise). Compare 1 Peter 3:18, which says Christ was "put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit." The almost identical language of 4:6 lets us know the ones under discussion are not wicked sinners but saved saints.

Brother Coffman has a fuller explanation in his commentary on 1 Peter 4:6:

"The dead' here are exactly the same as the dead in the previous verse, i.e., all who had lived on earth and had died previously from the time of Peter's words, there being, it seems, a particular reference to Christians who had recently died and who were the object of certain anxieties on the part of their Christian relatives. Paul, it will be remembered, addressed the Thessalonians on the same subject. [Albert] Barnes spoke of this thus: 'It was natural in such a connection to speak of those who had died in the faith, and to show for their encouragement that, though they had been put to death, yet they still

lived to God.' Significantly, the dead mentioned here were dead at the time of Peter's writing, but were not dead when the gospel was preached to them. Fancy theories built upon ignorance of what this verse says and envisioning all kinds of campaigns to preach the gospel to the hosts of the dead, with the postulation of a glorious second chance for all who were disobedient in life - such notions are not merely preposterous; they are contradictory to many plain teachings of the New Testament.

"Bruce's explanation of this is excellent: 'Deceased Christians are not deprived of the benefits of the gospel. "According to men" they are judged in the flesh (suffered bodily death); yet "according to God" (from God's point of view), the spiritual life which they received ... endures forever.' The plain meaning is that the gospel was preached to people when living, who are now dead; just as it would be perfectly correct to say that it was preached to saints in glory, or to souls that are in perdition, meaning that it was preached to them when on earth. This verse with such a mention of preaching 'to the dead' has been grossly misunderstood; but the real motivation for the misunderstanding does not lie in any unusual difficulty in the text itself, but in the desire of people who are enraptured with the thought of a second chance. As Barclay put it, 'It gives a breath-taking glimpse of a gospel of a second chance!'

"Peter's thought here is squarely directed against objections which the Christian community encountered from their pagan contemporaries, the thought of the objection being, 'You people die just like the rest of us; what then could be the advantage of being a Christian?' 'No,' the apostle said, 'Those who have died (the dead) may be judged in the flesh like men, by suffering physical death; but because the gospel was preached to them (while alive, when they responded), they are now living in the spirit like God.'" (from Coffman's Bible Commentary, Copyright © 1971-1993 by ACU Press, Abilene Christian University. All rights reserved.)

In summary, 1 Peter 3:18-20 does not teach that Christ at any time went into some purgatory-like state and offered certain wicked spirits a “get out of jail free card.” Peter simply declares that Christ preached in spirit through Noah to the wicked pre-flood people. --John Temples