

Series: God of All Grace

Message Title: To The Spirits in Prison: Christ is Victorious! / Jeff Kennedy 9/6/20

The text begins with Christ the suffering servant and it ends with the resurrected, glorious Son who is exalted to the right hand of God's power. The once submissive son is now appointed ruler over all things, angels, authorities, all powers.

For the better part of two chapters, Peter has been charging the church of Jesus with the difficult task of submitting to ungodly, sometimes unjust authorities. But here we find the rest of the story. All the authorities in the world, be they just or unjust, have now been subjected to Jesus. Christ reigns victorious. Christ is exalted high above all nations and their systems.

**Illus.** Even if you're not a student of history you have probably heard of the phrase, "The Battle of Waterloo." In 1815 the French army, commanded by Napoleon, was repulsed by the Duke of Wellington and the Prussian forces commanded by General Gebhard von Blucher. News was carried first by a ship that sailed from Europe across the English Channel to England's southern coast. The news was then relayed from the coast by naval signal flags to London. When the report was received in London at Winchester Cathedral, the flags began to spell out Wellington's defeat of Napoleon to the entire city:

"Wellington defeated . . ."

The bad news rapidly spread throughout every neighborhood and around England. A national heaviness set in—like a shroud over the mood of the people. The following day the fog lifted and the rest of the message could be seen:

"Wellington defeated the enemy!"

Despair was immediately replaced with rejoicing in the streets.<sup>1</sup>

**Transition:** Peter is going to take that same lesson and apply it now to believers who are suffering in the fog of persecution. Believers whose victory in Christ feels obscured by the miasma of suffering for his name's sake.

**Peter** is a tested soldier—he knows what it's like to experience the confusion of apparent defeat. And he can encourage these believers, "I know the world right now seems bleak. I know that right now it looks as though darkness is on the rise; persecution is on our doorstep; suffering for the gospel is in our future. But you need to know what the rest of the banner really says. **You need to know that through the haze of your worry and your fear and the world's apparent victory over righteousness—you need to know that the banner really reads "Christ defeated the powers of hell and darkness and death when he came out of**

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<sup>1</sup> Helm, David R.. 12 Peter and Jude (Redesign) (Preaching the Word) (p. 122).

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**that grave on Sunday morning!** You need to know that the message could not be more hopeful—the news could not be better! Sin is defeated. The grave is empty. Where o death is your sting!”

Now this is Peter’s larger context. We follow the suffering servant who gave his life for all—we follow the man on the tree who bore our sins and submitted to the authorities and powers for a time. We are followers of the way of suffering.

Paul said “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection—and *the fellowship of his sufferings—becoming like him in his death.*”

No victory without the cross. There’s no crown without the beam.

No resurrection without death.

But while in this moment we sense the sentence of death; in this moment we feel the forces and powers of dark realms against us...

**Now, let’s look at this weird verse.**

This passage changes the focus in 1 Peter from suffering, submission and death—to victory in Jesus.

### **Exposition**

**v. 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,”

**The Phrase “for Christ also”**—that phrase appears once before in 2:21 putting Christ forth as an example of Christian suffering—namely an example of unjust suffering or suffering for doing good. The point of comparison in the text is not that our sufferings are exactly like his or have the same consequence. For Christ suffered “once” and he suffered “for sins.”

**Heb. 9:26-27** “But now he has appeared one time, at the end of the ages, for the removal of sin by the sacrifice of himself... Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.”

So, Christ’s suffering was *once* and it was *for sin*. That’s how his suffering was different than ours.

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**How then is his suffering an example for Christians who live a life of persecution and suffering in an ongoing way?**

Christ suffered unjustly without retribution upon his enemies.

It's those who have been made righteous, declared justified in God's sight through the blood of Christ—they are now being made to suffer for righteousness sake (3:13, 17).

**The point of comparison is the good man/woman suffering at the hands of unjust people.** Christ is our exemplar. He is our standard bearer in the face of Christian suffering.

But just as chapter 2:12-25 tells us that like Christ we are to keep our conduct honorable among unbelievers, and to do so by submitting to unjust human authorities—those who represent systems where good people are at times experience maltreatment—so here in 3:18ff. he assures us that subjection is not the end of the story. Submission to undeserved persecution following Christ's example is the "good conduct" he expects—but we are to do so knowing that Christ has in fact won the victory over the powers and forces of darkness.

**Now he enlightens us to the scope of Christ's victory and gives two analogies to support that claim.**

"being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, <sup>19</sup> in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, <sup>20</sup> 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."

**Christ was put to death with respect to the body**—that is *in the realm or the domain of the flesh*.

But he was enlivened with respect to the spirit—that is *in the domain of the supernatural realm of the spirit*.

This odd passage raises several questions immediately for the interpreter:

- (1) who did Christ proclaim the message to?
- (2) what was the message he proclaimed?
- (3) where did he go to proclaim this message?
- (4) how does this relate to Christ's victory for the Christian in present circumstances?

**There are essentially 3 historic interpretations of this passage:**

**Option 1: Christ's descended to hell to preach to the "spirits" of the people who disobeyed in Noah's day.** The first (made famous by the **early church father Origen (2<sup>nd</sup> century)** *was that between Christ's death and resurrection he descended* into hell in order to preach the victory of the gospel to people who had disobeyed in the time of Noah—which was viewed as an especially grievous-sinful age that brought a worldwide flood. **The idea here is that these imprisoned spirits are now being offered a second chance.** The upside of this view is it seems to reflect the straightforward claim of the passage. The downside would be theological. This would in fact be the only place in the NT where a person is said to be offered a 2<sup>nd</sup> chance after death.

**Option 2: The Spirit of Christ preached through Noah in his day.** The second (made popular by Augustine in the 4<sup>th</sup> century): Christ, through the Spirit, preached to the people who were alive in Noah's day; afterwards they died, faced judgment and are in hell. But at the time when they lived, it was the Spirit of Christ in Noah's ministry that proclaimed the truth to them. **This would certainly be supported by Peter's statement in 1:11 that the prophets looked intently into the times and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ within them was pointing.** If this idea can be extended to the patriarchs' narratives, it would lend support to the view that though the spirits who disobeyed are *now in prison in the heavenlies, at the time Christ preached to them.*

**Option 3: Christ proclaimed his victory to disobedient supernatural powers after his resurrection.** The third view is that Jesus is not preaching to human beings who sinned at all, **and is not preaching the gospel for salvation— but proclaiming the victory of the gospel to angelic beings who were responsible to entice sinful men in the days of Noah**—these spirits are guilty of particularly heinous acts which led men astray to the degree that God had to wipe out humanity with a global flood. This is the most common view of scholars and theologians today.

It's also the one I adopt because I think it makes best sense of the context and the culture.

**Reasons why I think it's referring to dark spiritual powers imprisoned awaiting the day of judgment:**

**(1) First, Peter lived at a time when people took the existence of the supernatural for granted.** It was simply a given that there were such things as angels and demons, God and Satan, and spiritual forces in heavenly realms that were bent on their demise and destruction. After all, Peter experienced Satan's influence directly in Mt 16 and Lk 23 when he rebuked Jesus for saying that the Messiah had to die and be buried. Jesus told him, "get behind me Satan, you do not affirm God's plan."

- **By contrast you and I live in a secular-naturalist world which assumes these things do not exist**, or at least they are not accessible.
- **To be sure we do affirm that there is much superstition in the world that has no basis in either scientific fact or biblical fact.** But the Bible does teach that there is a realm or domain of the spirit. And it teaches us what it's like.

**(2) Second, the word "spirit" is used as a synonym when referring to the Holy Spirit, angels and demons but only descriptively of humans.** God is called the Spirit, angels are called "spirits" sent to minister to the heirs of salvation, and demons are called "demon spirits." But humans are not spoken of this way. Instead the word *spirit* is descriptive of a human faculty—such as the "spirit of your mind" or the "poor in spirit" or "the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak." In these cases "spirit" is not being used as a synonym for "person" but rather to describe some faculty that they possess. When Scripture speaks of a person in immaterial terms, it refers to them as "souls."

Peter refers to the "spirits" in prison, not souls or human persons.

Furthermore, when he does unmistakably mention the people saved by the ark Noah built, he calls them *souls* not *spirits*. And that is usually translated in your Bible as "persons."

**(3) Third, the story of “fallen angels” enticing mankind into grievous sin resulting in the flood (Gen. 6:1-4) was very popular in Peter’s day.** The result of these fallen spirits’ rebellion was so troubling that they had to be imprisoned in hell before the final day of judgment. The interpretation of Gen 6 was well-known and Peter himself later refers to it as does the writer of Jude.

**2 Peter 2:4** “For if God didn’t spare the angels who sinned but cast them into hell and delivered them in chains of utter darkness to be kept for judgment; <sup>5</sup> and if he didn’t spare the ancient world, but protected Noah, a preacher of righteousness, and seven others, when he brought the flood on the world of the ungodly...”

**Jude 6** “and the angels who did not keep their own position but abandoned their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains in deep darkness for the judgment on the great day.”

**(4) Fourth, the paragraph itself reveals that Peter believes in angelic powers in the heavenly realms.** 3:22 “Jesus Christ, <sup>22</sup> who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.” Peter reveals in this very paragraph by way of a summary statement that Christ is victorious because he has gone into heaven, is at the right hand of the power of God, with all angelic powers brought into subjection to him. That seems to be a fitting summary to his earlier statement about Christ’s proclamation to the spirits imprisoned.

**(5) Fifth, the word “prison” (Gk. *phulaké*) is not used anywhere in the NT as a synonym for hell or hades.** Which is generally where human persons are said to be banished after a life of having rejected Christ. This prison seems to be different than that. Again, in 2 Pet. 2:4 he uses the word *Tartarus*, which, in Greek mythology describes the chamber where only the most wicked of beings were kept. I think what Peter is saying here is that there were fallen angels who so grievously enticed and lured mankind in the days of Noah into sin—the corruption was so perverse, pervasive and otherwise permanent—that it required God to judge the earth with a flood and to incarcerate these disobedient spirits responsible in a place where not even Satan himself has been confined.

**Summary:** Peter intended to present Jesus as the example of Christian suffering for doing good in the face of unjust persecution. Though he was persecuted to the death for the truth; he was made alive by resurrection power—by which he went and proclaimed his victory to the most egregious offenders in human history—the wicked spirits who enticed mankind to sin so grievously that it brought a world-wide judgment. And his point is very simply this: This enthroned King at the right hand of God has brought into subjection all the spiritual forces in heavenly realms so that the persecuted faithful need no longer fear, nor be

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intimidated by harassment even if that maltreatment is driven by demonic forces. Christ has won the victory. And though right now the banner through the fog of suffering seems to read “Christ defeated”...we know what the mist and haze obscures—the rest of that message “Christ defeated sin, death and hell.” And we stand on that foundation.