

# “THINK ON THESE THINGS”

Philippians 4:8

## 1 Peter 3:19

### Preaching to the Spirits in Prison

*“For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: By which also He went and preached unto the spirits in prison; which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, where in few, that is, eight souls were saved by water” (1 Pet. 3:18-20).*

Our text is often considered to be one of the more difficult in the New Testament, especially verse 19 wherein Peter said of Christ, *“By which also He went and preached unto the spirits in prison.”*

There are a number of different views regarding this text. In this short study, I begin by presenting some of them. Simon J. Kistemaker, in his commentary on Peter’s epistle, outlines chronologically some of the interpretations of these verses as well as objections to these interpretations. Kistemaker presents the following views:

- A. Clement of Alexandria, about A.D. 200, taught that Christ went to hell in his spirit to proclaim the message of salvation to the souls of sinners who were imprisoned there since the flood.
- B. Augustine, about A.D. 400, said that the preexistent Christ proclaimed salvation through Noah to the people who lived before the flood.
- C. In the last half of the sixteenth century, Cardinal Robert Bellarmine introduced a view that has been held by many Roman Catholics: In His spirit, Christ went to release the souls of the righteous who repented before the flood and had been kept in Limbo, that is, the place between heaven and hell where, Bellarmine said, the souls of the Old Testament saints were kept.
- D. An interpretation promulgated by Friedrich Spitta in the last decade of the nineteenth century is: After His death and before His resurrection, Christ preached to the fallen angels, also known as the *“sons of God”* who during Noah’s time had married *“daughters of men”* (Gen. 6:2; 2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6).
- E. Contemporary commentators teach that the resurrected Christ, when He ascended into heaven, proclaimed to imprisoned spirits His victory over death.

Concerning these views presented by Kistemaker, he offers some brief comments on the major objections to them:

#### Two major objections to Clement’s view:

1. He says that Scripture is silent on the imprisonment of souls condemned by God; and
2. He says that Augustine’s doctrine, that there is not conversion after death, repudiates Clement’s view.

**Objection to Augustine’s view:** Kistemaker claims that Augustine departed from the wording of 1 Peter 3:19. He says that Augustine spoke of the preincarnate Christ and not of the Christ who was put to death in the body and made alive by the spirit.

**Objection to Bellarmine’s view:** Of the view of Bellarmine, who Kistemaker says taught that even though Christ’s body died on the cross, His soul remained alive; and in His spirit, Christ went to release the souls of those who repented before the flood. He says that Protestants reject this view because they contend that the Old Testament saints are in heaven.

**Objection to Spitta’s view:** Kistemaker says that the view of Spitta, who said that Christ, after His death and

before His resurrection, preached to fallen angels who during Noah's time had married "*daughters of men*," can be rejected based on Jesus' argument when He answered the Sadducees who questioned Him concerning the resurrection. Jesus responded by saying that angels neither marry nor are given in marriage (Matt. 22:30).

**Objections to the view of contemporary commentators:** Of contemporary commentators who teach that the resurrected Christ, during His ascension to heaven, proclaimed to the "*spirits in prison*" His victory over death and that He passed through the realm where the fallen angels were kept, Kistemaker says, "*This is the interpretation that has met favorable response in Protestant and Roman Catholic circles and is in harmony with teaching of the Petrine passage and the rest of Scripture.*"

After considering these divergent views, let's concentrate on what the Bible teaches, realizing that if we arrive at a conclusion that contradicts Scripture, that conclusion must be false. Therefore, we need to determine several things about this passage that will help us reach a correct conclusion based on Bible teaching, not on who or who does not accept the conclusion. As we study the text, we will:

- Consider the immediate context and discuss the spirit by which the preaching was accomplished, who did the preaching, and when it was done.
- Identify who Peter referred to when he wrote about the "*spirits in prison.*"
- Draw a conclusion and make an application.

**First**, the immediate context of this Scripture section concerns the suffering of Christ, the just One for mankind, the unjust (1 Pet. 3:18). Throughout the Apostle Peter's epistles, he discussed the blessings Christians have because of Christ's suffering, and he also discussed the fact that Christians must be willing to suffer for Christ's sake. In order to reap the benefits of the sufferings of Christ, the righteous One who suffered for us, the unrighteous, we must be willing to suffer for His cause. In 1 Peter 2:21-25, Peter reminded his readers of the example of Christ's suffering, and then in 1 Peter 4:1-4 and 12-19, he emphasized the sufferings that Christians must endure in order to be numbered with the righteous who will "*scarcely be saved*" (1 Pet. 4:18).

**Second**, Peter mentioned the fact that Christ was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in, or by, the Spirit. By this statement, Peter did not imply that the Spirit of Christ died; rather, he said that even though Christ died in the flesh, He was made alive, or raised from the dead, by the operation of the Holy Spirit (1 Pet. 3:18). Peter then said, "***By which also He went and preached to the spirits in prison.***" "***By which***" refers to the same spirit (the Holy Spirit) mentioned in the previous verse, whereby He preached to the "*spirits in prison.*"

The word "***by***" in this verse is from the Greek word *en*. Strong's Lexicon defines it as: "*a primary preposition denoting (fixed) position (in place, time, or state), and (by implication) instrumentality.*" So, by means of the same spirit by which Christ was raised from the dead, He (Christ) preached. Thus, Christ preached or heralded the "*spirits in prison.*" Some argue that this preaching by Christ took place after His death and prior to His resurrection. The text does not support this conclusion.

A familiar New Testament passage that has a parallel meaning sheds light on what Peter wrote in verse 19 of our text. Consider Paul's statement in Ephesians 2:16-17, where he said of Christ: "***And that He (Christ) might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: and He (Christ) came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh.***" Paul spoke metaphorically, stating that Christ preached peace to the Jews and Gentiles; but the meaning is that He did so through the work of the Holy Spirit who through the instrumentality of inspired men heralded the good news, or gospel, of salvation to *all* men. Likewise, Christ did not go in person or *in a spirit* and preach to those in Noah's day, but through the work of the Holy Spirit and the instrumentality of Noah's mouth, Christ preached to the "*spirits in prison.*"

**Third**, in verse 20 Peter identified these particular "*spirits in prison.*" The inspired apostle said, "***Which sometime (aforetime-ASV) were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water.***" Peter identified the spirits under consideration as those who were disobedient in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared. This period of time occurred during the "***longsuffering of God***" that Peter mentioned. Thus, these spirits are logically the souls or spirits of the unjust men who lived when Noah lived before the flood, but whose

spirits were imprisoned in torment in the Hadean realm when Peter wrote this epistle. And, since Peter himself, in 2 Peter 2:5, called Noah a **“preacher of righteousness,”** it is logical, Scriptural, and in harmony with what Peter wrote in our text to conclude that the **“spirits in prison”** do not refer to all souls disembodied and imprisoned in the Hadean realm (hell-KJV) to which Christ referred as a place of torment in the account of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk. 16:19-31). Specifically, these spirits are those who were disobedient during Noah’s day and are now, because of their disobedience, imprisoned in torment being reserved **“unto the day of judgment to be punished”** (2 Pet. 2:9). The views of Clement, Bellarmine, Spitta, and the contemporary writers mentioned by Kistemaker must then be rejected on this basis, and the view of Augustine is more in harmony with Peter’s writings.

## Conclusion and Application

I realize that this is not an exhaustive study of this passage. But, after considering various views of men, the immediate Bible text, and other key Bible passages, the Biblical evidence points to the following conclusion:

1. That Christ, through Noah, preached and proclaimed the divinely revealed message of salvation to the disobedient of Noah’s day while he, by faith (Heb. 11:7), prepared the ark as the longsuffering of God waited.
2. Peter looked back on this event and referred to the fact that only eight souls were saved by water, in contrast to all the disobedient of Noah’s day to whom Noah preached righteousness, but who were destroyed by water during the universal flood because they failed to repent and heed Noah’s preaching (Gen. 7:17-23).
3. Peter then drew a connection between the flood’s waters, which both saved and destroyed, and the baptismal waters, the **“like figure”** or **“antitype,”** that save those who, in this age, are obedient to Christ’s gospel (1 Pet. 3:21).
4. Peter referred to the souls of those disobedient ones, who were in the flesh during the days of Noah and were destroyed by the flood, as **“spirits in prison.”** They were imprisoned in torment when Peter wrote, and they still are.

These disobedient ones are the spirits to whom Christ (through Noah’s mouth) preached when Noah spoke (preached) as he was **“moved by the Holy Ghost”** (2 Pet. 1:21). — *tgmc* ■

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## **“New Heavens and a New Earth”**

By Joe R. Price

**“Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells”** (2 Pet. 3:13, NKJV).

The basic meaning of the expression **“heavens and the earth”** is that of a dwelling place, a habitation. In Genesis 1:1, God created the physical world – **“the heavens and the earth”** – for humanity to inhabit (Gen. 1:26-28). We later find a similar expression used with a spiritual meaning (Isa. 65:17; 66:22). Isaiah spoke of God creating **“new heavens and a new earth”** in which people would come to worship before Him (Isa. 65:17; 66:23). Isaiah was speaking of the church – the habitation or dwelling place of God’s people (Isa. 2:1-4). God dwells with His people (the church), and they with Him (2 Cor. 6:16-18). Christians are raised out of the death of sin to sit **“in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus”** (Eph. 2:5-6). We become citizens of a new kingdom when we are saved in Christ (Col. 1:13). Christians inhabit a new and spiritual realm, the church (Acts 2:47). Our citizenship is in heaven (Phil. 3:20). When Peter used the expression **“new heavens and a new earth”** in 2 Peter 3:13, he was looking forward to yet another dwelling place of God’s people – the eternal kingdom, our heavenly home (2 Pet. 1:11). In visionary form, John saw this **“new heaven and a new earth”** where righteousness dwells (Rev. 21:1). Entrance into it will be abundantly given to faithful Christians (2 Pet. 1:10-11). — *Sword Tips*, April 9, 2017. ■

Service Times - Sunday: 9:00 & 10:00 AM; 6:00 PM - Wednesday: 7:00 PM

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