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The Spirits in Prison

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Although Peter on one occasion complained that Paul wrote some things hard to be understood, Peter himself has a few verses whose meaning at first sight is not too clear. One such passage is I Peter 3:18-20:

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 long-suffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water.

To many people these verses are puzzling, and several interpretations have been offered to explain how Christ preached to the spirits in prison. In general there are two types of explanation. First, the verses are taken to mean that Christ used Noah to preach to the wicked that were about to be drowned in the flood. Second, the verses are interpreted to mean that Christ in person preached to spirits in the realm of the dead. This second interpretation is divided on the identity of the dead: the dead to who Christ preached might be the righteous dead, or they might be the wicked dead. Let us examine this second interpretation first.

The Righteous Dead?

This is an old and widely accepted interpretation. Irenaeus, Tertullian, both the Greek and Roman churches, and also Zwingli and Calvin held that Christ announced salvation to the Old Testament saints and brought them from the realms of death into

heaven. In accordance with this idea John 3:13, “No one has ascended into heaven but he that came down from heaven,” is said to mean that no Old Testament saint could precede Christ into heaven. They had to wait for Christ’s ascension. The prison is the abode of the dead, and the preaching is the proclamation of Christ’s victory.

As further support of this view Acts 2:27, 31 are taken to mean that Christ’s soul went to hell or at least to the abode of the dead, though of course God would not permit his soul to be held there. Some have also appealed to Phil. 2:10 by taking the things under the earth that bow at the name of Jesus to be either the righteous or wicked dead. More plausible is the use of Eph. 4:8, 9. “When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended into the lower parts of the earth?” These lower parts of the earth are supposed to be the realm of the dead, and the idea is repudiated that this descent is the Incarnation and Christ’s descent to earth.

Before adopting this view certain problems must be faced and solved. In the first place Peter’s text does not mention anything about preaching to the saints. *The spirits* to whom Christ preached *are explicitly called disobedient. This fact must be taken as a fixed point of interpretation.* There is no reference to Old Testament saints. So, if Christ preached in person to anyone between the time of his death and resurrection, it would have to be the wicked dead, and whatever captivity Christ led captive, it could not be the Old Testament saints considered as held in prison.

In the next place the only disobedient people that Peter mentions are *those who lived in the days of Noah.* This time-reference is another reason for refusing to think that Christ preached to Abraham David, and the prophets. Not only is it wrong to call these men disobedient, but further they did not live at the time Peter mentions.

This time-reference also militates against the view that Christ preached to all the wicked dead. From what Peter actually says, we could only conclude that Christ preached to those who were disobedient in the time of Noah. But without pressing this point too far at the moment, let us consider other aspects of the idea that Christ preached personally to the wicked in hell, and that the preaching, of necessity, is the announcement of their condemnation.

The Wicked Dead?

As for the notion that Christ announced the damnation of the wicked in hell, it is hard to see how it ties in with the context. The main idea that Peter wants to enforce is that Christians should be willing to suffer for Christ's sake and to suffer unjustly. Preaching to the wicked in hell does not advance Peter's main purpose. Or, if attention be centered on the nearer idea of Christ's being raised from the dead by the Holy Spirit, it still is not clear how this announcement of damnation adds to the theme. And it will hardly do to say that Peter just had to fill space to make his epistle long enough, and so was driven to insert something true but irrelevant.

But the decisive objection to understanding these words to refer to the announcement of damnation is that the verb, *to preach*, ordinarily means to preach the gospel. It does not mean a judicial sentence, nor in the New Testament does it refer to sundry announcements. The regular meaning is the announcement of the gospel.

Because this is so obvious, some interpreters have tried to hold to the general view while modifying it to make Christ's work the preaching of the gospel instead of the announcement of damnation. While this maneuver escapes these immediate objections, it must face others.

Since the Bible does not teach that there is a second chance to be saved, a chance in the next life, but teaches that man's destiny is irrevocably fixed in this life, there would remain no reasonable purpose for preaching the gospel to the wicked in hell. And, to return to a previous point, all these attempts fail to explain the mention of the antediluvian unbelievers. Any preaching in hell should be directed to all, and not to just a few. But the text specifically mentions those who lived in the days of Noah.

This view therefore, though adopted by many and held for so long a time, must be set aside. Perhaps the other view, held by Augustine and Beza, will prove better. According to this interpretation Peter is thought to say that Noah spoke by the Holy Spirit to his disobedient contemporaries, and that the flood which destroyed them is a type of baptism.

Noah's Wicked Contemporaries?

This interpretation must also face objections. For one thing, it is pointed out that Peter makes the subject of the verb, Christ. Christ went and preached, and hence Noah cannot be the preacher. However, this objection is not so serious as it might seem at first. Peter actually says, Christ was made alive by the Spirit, by whom also he preached. This preaching therefore was done by Christ through the Spirit. What this might mean can be seen in chapter one verse eleven. In the first chapter Peter speaks of the Old Testament prophets. These prophets had received a message from God, and they studied the message to see what God meant. The words are, "searching what . . . the spirit of Christ which was in them did signify when it testified beforehand . . ." Now, obviously, if the Spirit of Christ spoke through the prophets, then too Christ through the Spirit could very well preach in the person of Noah. To suppose that the Spirit of Christ is not the Holy Spirit and could not therefore inspire Noah is a supposition contrary to Peter's thought and contrary to other New Testament passages. For example, Paul in Eph. 2:17 virtually says that it was Christ, through his missionaries, that preached the gospel in Ephesus. So far as this point goes therefore, this interpretation stands up under scrutiny.

If the preaching was Noah's testimony to his contemporaries, then the prison is the prison house of sin. The other interpretation assumes that the prison must be hell or hades. But it is as reasonable to speak of the bonds of sin as to speak of the bonds of hell. The mention of a prison therefore does not rule out the idea that Noah was the preacher.

Another argument is that the participles, *died*, *made alive*, *went*, and the verb *preached*, indicate a temporal succession; and hence the preaching must have occurred after the death of Christ, and not in the time of Noah. But in the first place, if this were so, the preaching would have had to occur after Christ's resurrection, and not between his death and resurrection, as is usually supposed. Furthermore, the mention of the preaching is not so clearly connected with any alleged temporal succession as it is with the reference to the Spirit. Of course the resurrection had to follow the crucifixion; but the thought of the passage is not on the time element, but on the significance of these events in bringing sinners to God.

Thus the several objections that are raised against the personal preaching of Noah do not make this interpretation impossible.

Now, positively and finally, this interpretation is the only one that can explain the mention of the wicked at the time of Noah, and the mention of Noah is motivated by Peter's desire to show that the flood is a type of baptism. In the larger connection Peter is explaining the work of Christ, the turning away from sin, the salvation of believers out of an ungodly world, and their tribulations during their lifetime. Peter thinks he can make his ideas clear by an Old Testament example, and Noah is more suitable than any other. For this reason Peter can confine his thought to one group of men. Had he been thinking of a personal preaching by Christ in hell, he could not have restricted his attention to this one group.