

Spirits In Prison

1 Peter 3:18-20

18 . . . 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, 19 in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, 20 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. (1 Peter 3:18-20 (ESV))

May I begin today's message with the confession that God has not given me a full understanding of all the truths that are contained in this special passage, especially the words in verse 19. Listen again carefully to these words. I'll begin in verse 18,

18 . . . 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, 19 in which he (the Lord Jesus) went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison. (1 Peter 3:18-19 (ESV))

But though I do not have as good an understanding as I would like, I do believe that we should push on ahead anyway and gain as much as God will be gracious to reveal to us today.

These first words, beginning in verse 18, are very straightforward and familiar to us in that this is part of the "pure Gospel" that is proclaimed to us throughout the whole of the New Testament and is especially spoken about in 1 Corinthians 15 where the Apostle Paul proclaimed,

³ . . . I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.
(1 Corinthians 15:1-4 (ESV))

Those words are essentially the same as these that we now read here in verse 18 of this passage in 1st Peter,

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, (1 Peter 3:18 (ESV))

This is the "Gospel" in one of its simplest forms, telling us clearly and plainly that it is only in and through the death of Christ on the cross that you and I are saved and brought into an eternal relationship with God the Father.

But then verse 19 adds in a very mysterious component to this otherwise very simple statement of the “Gospel”. Here we read,

19 in which he (the Lord Jesus) went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison.
(1 Peter 3:19 (ESV))

These words are few and they are simple, but they have been the source and the impetus for many wide-ranging thoughts and many hopes within the hearts of many Christians. For those who would read these words in verse 19 in a very literal manner and not take into account many of the other contrasting verses in other portions of the scriptures, it could seem from these words that in the hours just following Jesus’ death and burial, He took on a very special mission, one of preaching to unsaved people who had died at other times and were in the pits of torment awaiting their final judgment.

And that same sort of possibility is suggested again in 1 Peter 4 verse 5. Listen!

⁵ but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. ⁶
For this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does. (1 Peter 4:5-6 (ESV))

Both of these passages hint at the possibility of one more opportunity, a “second chance” at salvation. And many within both the Protestant Churches and Catholic Churches have grabbed hold of belief in that possibility, so much so that Catholic Theologians have developed a whole system of doctrines and theology to support their beliefs. In so doing, they have created a kind of “waiting room”, called “purgatory” where those who have died without Christ could go and await a “final judgment”. But with the additional provision that with some diligent prayer and intercession by the right persons, intermediaries and priests, those people waiting there in Purgatory might be able to be “prayed” out of Purgatory into heaven.

Unfortunately, this Catholic doctrine came into serious disrepute in earlier centuries when Catholic Church leaders seized upon the opportunity while family members of deceased loved ones were in crisis and grief to extort money and property from them by giving them the belief that they could “buy” their deceased loved ones out of Purgatory and save them from hell. The practice was called “selling dispensations”.

But even though such corrupt practices brought shame and embarrassment to the Catholic Church and they ceased to do those things, the basic doctrines and practices have survived and are still today actively pursued in the hope that deceased ones can be “prayed” out of purgatory and into heaven.

A question . . . is there any evidence in these scriptures that lend credence to the Catholic beliefs concerning “Purgatory”? Some would say that the parable that Jesus gave about “Lazarus and the Rich Man” is at least evidence of a “place of waiting” after we die. Listen to these words in Luke 16! This portion is quite lengthy, but as we learned when we studied these scriptures in Sunday School recently, we need to read all of them to get the full understanding of them. Please turn there with me and follow along! Luke 16,

19 “There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 20 And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, 21 who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. 22 The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s side (his bosom). The rich man also died and was buried, 23 and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. 24 And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.’ 25 But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. 26 And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.’ 27 And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house— 28 for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’ 29 But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ 30 And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ 31 He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.’”
(Luke 16:19-31 (ESV))

In these words, Jesus gives us a very special “window” into the time, and the place, and the conditions that you and I will experience when we die and step from this life into the eternal realms. For those of us who have received Christ as our Savior and Lord, we will be carried by the angels into Paradise, here called “Abraham’s Bosom”, a place of joy, peace, comfort and rest.

But for those who did not in this life receive Christ as their Savior and Lord, they find themselves immediately in a place of horrible suffering, here called “Torment” and described as “anguish in flames”.

From this parable and from other places in the scriptures, we have come to understand that, yes, there really is an intermediate state of existence for our souls and spirits, mysterious places within the “Heavenly Realms” called “Paradise” and “Torment”, where we will go first to await the final sentence of our judgment to be carried out, the righteous then going into the “heaven of heavens” and the unrighteous into eternal hell.

But contrary to the beliefs held by our Catholic friends, once we arrive in one of those places, Paradise or Torment, there is very little other evidence in these scriptures to suggest that someone might be moved from one of those places to the other, especially from Torment into Paradise.

And these words that we just read here in this passage in Luke, really do seem to emphatically confirm that to be true, that no further mercy will be shown, no relief from suffering and no passing over the great chasm from one place to the other.

Some have argued that the case given in this parable was an extreme one, a very sinful rich man who daily witnessed the suffering of poor Lazarus, over and over again refusing to help him or to give him comfort, a clear-cut sinful behavior that deserved torment.

And those who argue that point continue by asking, “But what about all those far less sinful people who live in places and cultures where they seldom, if ever, hear the name of Christ and they never learn that they need Him to be their Savior and Lord? What about them?” Could those possibly be the ones to whom Jesus might have preached? Because it sure does seem more in keeping with the nature of God that He would have provided some form of “grace” and “mercy” to every soul that has ever lived.

And that part of their argument is true. It is absolutely the nature of God to provide grace and mercy to every creature. But most all of the “mainline” church scholars contend that God’s revelation of Himself is accomplished through His works of nature. One theologian words it this way,

When people wonder how God can judge those who’ve never heard the gospel, we should direct their attention to Romans 1:18 and following where Paul declares that all **“are without excuse”**. Listen!

¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things

that have been made. So they are without excuse. ²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. (Romans 1:18-21 (ESV))

This commentator goes on to say . . . People are not judged on the basis of a gospel they've never heard but because of their unrepentant refusal to respond in worship and gratitude when confronted with the unmistakable and inescapable clarity of the revelation God has made of himself in creation. God's "invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived" (Romans 1:20a). No one can appeal to ignorance or the lack of opportunity to believe. God has done everything necessary to establish their moral accountability. He concludes that "although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened". (Romans 1:21)

These words here in Romans 1 declare to us that there is not one soul that has ever lived, or ever will live on the earth who can appeal in judgment that they did not know that there was a God who would someday hold them accountable for their sins.

This understanding bespeaks the Arminian doctrine that declares that God's Holy Spirit pours out his presence upon all men and women regardless of where they live and the culture they are in, convicting them of sin and leaving them without excuse.

But again, with all this being so, what does God mean and what is His purpose in giving us these special words here in our text today in verse 19 and also the words in 1 Peter 4? Those words again. Verse 19

19 in which he (the Lord Jesus) went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison.
(1 Peter 3:19 (ESV))

And 1 Peter 4 verse 5.

⁵ but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. ⁶
For this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does. (1 Peter 4:5-6 (ESV))

A possibility that would allow for some "second chances" has a great appeal within most all of our hearts, mine included; because it is an unfortunate truth that most of the people that we know, including some dearly loved family members and relatives have died probably never having put their trust in Christ for salvation. And the thought of them spending an eternity in a burning pit of hell is heartbreaking to us.

So then, what are we to conclude concerning these words? Is there a possibility that in those intervening hours between His death and His resurrection, the Lord Jesus might have actually gone and preached a gospel message to those in Torment? I confess that I don't know exactly what these words mean. But I do know that something really did take place involving at least one special group of people, here in our passage described as the people who watched as Noah built the Ark. That is what these words in verse 20 tell us. Listen again,

19 in which he (Jesus) went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, 20 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. (1 Peter 3:19-20 (ESV))

Again, I confess that these words are so unusual in what they say and in their implied purpose that I have not gained an adequate understanding of them. And I must conclude that for the time being these words will probably remain a mystery that we will ponder until we see Jesus face to face and He explains them to us. But be that as it may, as I have shared with you in the past, I actually love the mysteries of God. It is only through mystery that "faith" is stimulated, excited and fueled.

May I offer one final thought before we close, and I warn you that these last words are not clearly evidenced in these scriptures. But with that being said, because God has given us all of the scriptures that I have quoted for you today, some lending credence to the idea of "second chances" while others deny that possibility, perhaps God will again be a God of what I call "and" rather than of "either/or". By that I mean, though it seems that these two possibilities are so wide apart that both could not be true, that there can be no reconciliation between them, perhaps God has actually given us a hint at a possibility of a reconciliation, giving under special and perhaps rare situations a possibility of a special reprieve for some who might not ever have heard and understood the gospel.

Who knows! Again, these last words are only intended to provoke you to search the scriptures further and to find God's real meaning of these unusual words of scripture. Blessed be the Lord!

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, 19 in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, 20 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. (1 Peter 3:18-20 (ESV))