

DID JESUS GO TO HELL?

Survey of the Major Options and Issues on 1 Peter 3:18-22

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I. Introduction:

This is a very complicated if not difficult passage to interpret, one that has been widely debated by some of the most gifted and learned exegetical and theological scholars; there is no consensus even among conservative evangelicals.

In order to understand the debate we will survey major views regarding (II) the identity of the spirits in prison, (III) whether Jesus Christ preached to the spirits in prison, and (IV) what purposes He may have had in preaching to the spirits in prison.¹

1 Peter 3:18-22 (*English Standard Version*) states:

18 For Christ also ^m suffered ^{2 n} once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, ^o that he might bring us to God, being put to death ^p in the flesh but made alive ^q in the spirit, **19** in which ^s he went and ^q proclaimed to the spirits in prison, **20** because ⁴ they formerly did not obey, ^r when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, ^s while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, ^t eight persons, were brought safely through water. **21** Baptism, which corresponds to this, ^u now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but ^v as an appeal to God for a good conscience, ^w through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, **22** who has gone into heaven and ^x is at the right hand of God, ^y with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.²

II. The Identity of the "spirits in prison":

- A. There are three major views regarding the identity of the "spirits in prison":
1. ***Spirits of unbelievers in Noah's Day:*** These are the spirits (now in Hades) of deceased unbelievers who before the Flood heard Noah preach but were disobedient to God.
 - A. This view is embraced by Augustine, F. W. Beare, Cranfield, Wayne Grudem, and E.H. Plumptre.
 - B. One problem with this view is that verse 19 states that Christ, not Noah, preached.
 2. ***Spirits of fallen angels:*** These are the spirits (now in Hades) of fallen angels (supposedly alluded to in Genesis 6:1-8 by the term "*sons of God*") who cohabitated with women in Noah's day.
 - A. This view is embraced by Ernest Best, William Dalton, Peter Davids, D. Edmond Hiebert, J.N.D. Kelly, Reicke, and Edward G. Selwyn.

B. Several problems with this view which include the following:

1. The angels are sexless (Matthew 22:30) and therefore could not have co-habited with women.
 2. The flood came as a punishment on human beings, not on angels for “*God saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become*” (Gen. 6:5).
 3. The giants, which some say were the result of the cohabitation of angels and women, actually preceded this cohabitation (Gen. 6:4).
 4. Genesis 6:2 says the “*sons of God*” took women as wives, not just cohabited with them.
 5. There is great debate regarding the identity of the Sons of God in Genesis 6 including other options: Apostate Sethites (ungodly Sethites marry depraved Cainites, thus perverting the godly line by mixed marriage) or dynastic despots (despotic chieftains marry plurality of wives, thus polygamy of Cainite princes to expand dominion).
3. ***Demons***: These are fallen angels known as demons who were disobedient in Noah’s day, perhaps in motivating “*the sons of God*” (rulers) to sin. In other words, the rulers were demonically influenced. Thus, God punished those demons by imprisoning them (bound demons rather than free demons; 2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6).
- A. This view is embraced by France, Omanson, and John Murdoch Ross.

II. When did Jesus Christ preach to the spirits in prison?

- A. There are at least six major views: The fifth and sixth options are views that appear to have the most contextual support, though other views are embraced by evangelicals such as option 2. Except for option four which is unbiblical, we don’t have enough information to dogmatically conclude one option over the other.
1. **Jesus preached to unbelievers by means of the Holy Spirit through the person of Noah while they were still alive in Noah’s day. This view takes “spirit in verse 18 as the Holy Spirit.**
 - a. Proponent St. Augustine.
 - b. Problem: Time: Though this also debated, it seems more coherent to see “*flesh*” as a reference to Jesus’ pre-resurrection condition (following the Incarnation) and “*spirit*” as referring to His post-resurrection condition. Substantiation: same terminology is used in 4:6

again where he referred to believers who had died but were now alive. See Tom Constable's, *Expository Notes* for a summary on the various interpretations of verse 18 [www.soniclight.com].

2. **Jesus preached to the unbelievers of Noah's day when He descended into Hades between the time of Jesus' death and His resurrection.**
 - a. Proponent: C.E. Cranfield.
 - b. Problem: Jesus Christ did not descend into Hades when He died because He said to the third man on the cross, "*Today you will be with me in paradise*" (Luke 23:43).

3. **Jesus preached to demons when He descended into Hades (in His human spirit while His body was in the tomb) between the time of His death and His resurrection. This view is based upon the view that "spirit" in verse 18 was His bodiless spirit.**
 - a. Proponent: Wayne Grudem.
 - b. Problem: Jesus Christ did not descend into Hades when He died because He said to the third man on the cross, "*Today you will be with me in paradise*" (Luke 23:43).

4. **Jesus offered a second chance for salvation to the unbelievers of Noah's day when He descended into Hades. This view is based upon universalistic salvation notions regarding God's unconditional love for humanity.**
 - a. Proponents: Those who may hold the teaching of a "*second chance for salvation*" will contend that the work of Jesus Christ is sufficient to secure the salvation of the elect, but salvation is effectually secured by the means of faith. Thus, all people, even those who have heard and rejected, will be confronted with the claims of Christ in the life to come. Everyone given such an opportunity will of course accept it. People who hold this view may attempt to use this 1 Peter 3:18-22 to substantiate their view.
 1. They contend that it is absurd to consider an all-loving, all-powerful, all-knowing, and sovereign God would create a system whereby a portion of humanity (humanity made in His image) would be condemned to everlasting punishment.
 - a. To condemn the unsaved to everlasting punishment as a result of their relatively short life span on earth is unjust; punishment doesn't equal the time.
 - b. If an all-powerful, all-loving sovereign God desires all people to be saved (1 Tim. 2:3-4; 2 Pet. 3:9), then all will be saved and this includes those of Noah's generation.

2. Problems with this view are multifarious:³
- a. To be sure, Christ's death made all people saveable (2 Cor. 5:19), but each person must believe in order to be saved (vs. 20). But, the constant scriptural references to "*saving faith*" clearly indicate that some will not believe (John 1:11-12, 3:18, 20:31).
 - b. Jesus Christ clearly indicates that some people will go to eternal life and others to eternal punishment. In fact, we have other New Testament Scriptures that denote destruction of the non-elect: Romans 9:22; 2 Thessalonians 1:9; Revelation 21:8.
 - c. Just like Noah did (see sixth view), Jesus Christ and the Apostles of the N.T. constantly warned people of God's wrath and judgment on sin and urgently call them to repentance. Thus, if universalism is true, Christ and the apostles were either ignorant or grossly deceptive.
 - d. Though God possesses infinite perfection of love, God is an indivisible Being. Thus, He is also just and holy. Therefore, God has already devised a plan consistent with all His infinite perfections. It is up to man to accept God's plan, instead of devising his own plan and calling God unjust if He does not accept it.
 - e. Scripture never concedes of a second chance. And if this is the proof-text for a second chance following death, this passage is so problematic and debatable, that it could not serve as cogent support.
5. **He preached to the spirits (demons) after He was resurrected. The words "*made alive in the spirit*" (vs. 18) suggests His resurrected spirit.**
- a. Proponents: William Dalton, Ramsey Michaels, & Roy B. Zuck.
 - b. Substantiation:
 1. The words "*he went*" in 1 Peter 1:9 strongly suggest it. If He preached through the voice of Noah, in what sense did Christ go to a specific place?
 2. The first view (that Christ preached by the Holy Spirit through Noah) requires that "*spirit*" in 1 Peter 3:18 refers to the Holy Spirit. But that destroys the contrast suggested by "*flesh*" and "*spirit*." In the body He was dead, but then in His human spirit He was made alive (cf. 4:6).
 3. Christ did not descend into Hades when He died because He said to the third man on the cross, "*Today you will be with me in paradise*" (Luke 23:43).

4. “*In which*” in verse 1 (“*through whom,*” NIV) is best taken as referring to its nearest antecedent, “spirit,” at the end of verse 19, thus suggesting His supernatural, resurrected sphere in contrast to His “*flesh.*”

c. Purpose:

1. To proclaim to demons and Satan His victory over them through His resurrection (1 Peter 3:22; Col. 2:15). “*Preached*” means to proclaim as a herald. He did not offer salvation to Satan’s imprisoned hosts because they cannot be saved (Heb. 2:16).

6. **Pre-incarnate Jesus preached repentance to humans through Noah to the unrighteous humans *during Noah’s day.* Since they rejected Noah’s message of salvation, they were presently in prison-that is, hell.**

a. Proponents: Charles C. Ryrie, *Net Bible, The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Roger Raymer), and Paul R. Shockley.

1. Ryrie states, “*Most likely, this is a reference to the Christ’s preaching through Noah to those who, because they rejected that message, are now spirits in prison*” [*Ryrie Study Bible*, expanded edition, page 1981].

b. Support:

1. The temporal indications in v. 20a.
2. The wider argument of the book. These verses encourage believers to stand for righteousness and attempt to influence their contemporaries for the gospel in spite of potential suffering that may have to endure. All who identify with them and their Savior will be saved from the coming judgment, just as in Noah’s day [*Net Bible*, 2nd Edition, page 2221].
3. Peter 2:5 where Peter described Noah as a “*herald of righteousness, along with seven others, which God brought a flood on an ungodly world...*”
4. The statement “descended” means “went” is may also be translated “of whom in Holy Spirit, He went.” See the footnotes regarding ESV Translation.
5. Consider the following from Roger Raymer’s exposition of 1 Peter from *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*:

3:19-20. Through whom . . . He . . . preached to the spirits in prison has been subject to many interpretations. Some believe Peter here referred to the descent of Christ's Spirit into hades between His death and resurrection to offer people who lived before the Flood a second chance for salvation. However, this interpretation has no scriptural support. Others have said this passage refers to Christ's descent into hell after His crucifixion to proclaim His victory to the imprisoned fallen angels referred to in 2 Peter 2:4-5, equating them with "the sons of God" Moses wrote about (Gen. 6:1-2). Though much commends this view as a possible interpretation, the context seems more likely to be referring to humans rather than angels.

The "spirits" (*pneumas*, a term usually applied to supernatural beings but also used at least once to refer to human "spirits"; cf. Heb. 12:23) are described in 1 Peter 3:20 as those who were disobedient **when God waited patiently for Noah** to finish building **the ark**. They had rebelled against the message of God during the 120 years the ark was being built. God declared He would not tolerate people's wickedness forever, but would extend His patience for only 120 more years (Gen. 6:3). Since the entire human race except Noah (Gen. 6:5-9) was evil, God determined to "wipe mankind . . . from the face of the earth." The "spirits" referred to in 1 Peter 3:20 are probably the souls of the evil human race that existed in the days of Noah. Those "spirits" are now "in prison" awaiting the final judgment of God at the end of the Age. The problem remains as to *when* Christ preached to these "spirits." Peter's explanation of the resurrection of Christ (3:18) "by the Spirit" brought to mind that the preincarnate Christ was actually in Noah, ministering through him, by means of the Holy Spirit. Peter (1:11) referred to the "Spirit of Christ" in the Old Testament prophets. Later he described Noah as "a preacher of righteousness" (2 Peter 2:5). The Spirit of Christ preached through Noah to the ungodly humans who, at the time of Peter's writing, were "spirits in prison" awaiting final judgment. This interpretation seems to fit the general theme of this section (1 Peter 3:13-22)—keeping a good conscience in unjust persecution. Noah is presented as an example of one who committed himself to a course of action for the sake of a clear conscience before God, though it meant enduring harsh ridicule. Noah did not fear men but obeyed God and proclaimed His message. Noah's reward for keeping a clear conscience in unjust suffering was the salvation of himself and his family, who **were saved through water**, being brought safely through the Flood.⁴

III. What was Jesus Christ's purpose in preaching to the spirits in prison?

1st View:

- A. To preach condemnation to the unregenerate.
- B. Problem: But why did He need to do this? They were already condemned, and in a place of torment.

2nd View:

- A. To tell Old Testament saints that He [Jesus] was going to free them from the compartment of Hades known as Abraham's bosom and take them up to heaven.
- B. Proponent: John Calvin.
- C. Problem: He preached to spirits who had "disobeyed," not to the spirits of the saints.

3rd View:

- A. To give the wicked of Noah's day a second chance for salvation.
- B. Proponents of Universal Salvation.
- C. Problem: Scripture nowhere asserts the idea of second chance after death.

4th View:

- A. To proclaim to demons and Satan His victory over them through His resurrection (1 Peter 3:22; Col. 2:15). "Preached" means to proclaim as a herald. He did not offer salvation to Satan's imprisoned hosts because they cannot be saved (Heb. 2:16).
- B. Proponents: William Dalton, Michael Ramsey, & Roy B. Zuck.

5th View:

- A. Pre-incarnate Christ proclaiming repentance to the unregenerate *during* Noah's day by means of the Holy Spirit through the prophet Noah (cf. 2 Peter 2:5).
- B. Proponents: Charles Ryrie, Paul R. Shockley, and *Net Bible*.

¹ This material is largely adapted from Dr. Roy B. Zuck's DTS class handout titled, "Views on 1 Peter 1:19-21."

m ch. 2:21 ; 4:1 ; See Rom. 4:25

n Some manuscripts *died*

o Heb. 9:26 , 28

p Rom. 5:2

q ch. 4:1 ; Col. 1:22 ; [2 Cor. 13:4]

r ch. 4:6f

s Or *the Spirit , in whom*

t [See ver. 18 above]

u Or *when*

v Gen. 6:3 , 5 , 13 , 14

w Heb. 11:7

x Gen. 7:1 , 7 , 23 ; 8:18 ; 2 Pet. 2:5

y Mark 16:16 ; Acts 16:33 ; Rom. 6:3-6 ; Tit. 3:5

z [Rom. 10:10]

aa ch. 1:3

ab Acts 2:33 , 34 ; Rom. 8:34 ; Eph. 1:20 ; Col. 3:1 ; Heb. 1:3

ac Rom. 8:38 ; 1 Cor. 15:24 ; Eph. 1:21.

² *The Holy Bible: English standard version*. 2001 (electronic ed.) . Good News Publishers: Wheaton.

³ . H. Wayne House, *Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 109-110.

⁴ Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. 1983-c1985. *The Bible knowledge commentary: An exposition of the scriptures* . Victor Books: Wheaton, IL