

## Salvation is in Jesus Christ

I Peter 3:19-22

“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, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water. The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ: Who is gone into heaven, and is on the right hand of God; angels and authorities and powers being made subject unto him.”

I thought about titling this sermon, “Baptism Saves Us,” which would be a title taken directly from verse 21, but I was afraid that such a title might cause undue confusion. Yet the whole point of this passage is that baptism saves us. Of course, Peter is not talking about water baptism. Getting dunked under water does nothing spiritual for you in and of itself. Peter is speaking about a spiritual baptism into the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Why did the Holy Spirit inspire Peter to write this down for us here? Peter is writing to Christians: people who already know that salvation is in Jesus Christ. Peter has been writing about suffering. About Christians enduring unjust suffering

for the sake of Christ. He has just reminded us in verse 18 about the suffering Christ endured for us. Now he gives an illustration from the life of Noah and ties that in with baptism. How does that all connect?

God reminds us in these verses that our faith in Jesus Christ will be vindicated. We may be called upon to suffer unjustly for the name of Jesus Christ. But we can endure patiently when we remember that there is only one way of salvation: Salvation is in Jesus Christ.

We are going to divide this text into two parts. First, the illustration in verses 19 and 20, and then the application in verses 21 and 22.

Before we begin, I need to mention that there are several different interpretations of this passage. Some people believe that the spirits spoken of in verse 19 are the souls of men and women in hell and that Jesus went and preached the gospel to them after His crucifixion. Some people even go so far as to teach that these lost souls had an opportunity to repent and receive salvation. That position has some very serious theological and doctrinal issues.

Another position that is held to by good, Biblical scholars is that the spirits spoken of here are demons, fallen angels. And that Jesus Christ descended into hell after His crucifixion, not to preach the gospel to them, but to proclaim His victory over them.

Another interpretation of this passage is that the spirits mentioned in verse 19 are the souls of men who perished in the flood in the days of Noah. Jesus did

not preach to them in hell after His crucifixion, but He preached to them in the Holy Spirit through Noah before the flood. This is the position I have come to. This is what I can preach with a clear conscience before God this morning. I would encourage you to be a Berean and study this out for yourself from Scripture.

I say all of that just to let you know where I'm coming from when I preach from this text. I believe verse 19 is a reference to Jesus preaching by the Holy Spirit in the days of Noah.

### **I. The Illustration (v. 19-20)**

First, we see much by looking at the men of Noah's day. Their issue was spiritual (v. 19). Many people get off to a wrong start in addressing the problems of man because they begin with the assumption that man is merely a physical being. Such an assumption denies who man really is. Is man just a chemical machine? Are we just biological robots? Is life just a series of chemical reactions strung together by chance? When those chemical reactions can happen no longer, does life end and existence cease? No!

As the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow so eloquently wrote: "Life is real! Life is earnest! And the grave is not its goal; "Dust thou art, to dust returnest," Was not spoken of the soul."

The Bible is clear that there is more to man than just this physical body. Man was made in the image of God. Genesis 1:27 says, “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.”

God is a spiritual being. Jesus said in John 4:24, “God is a Spirit: and they that worship Him must worship him in spirit and in truth.”

In I Thessalonians 5:23 Paul wrote, “And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole *spirit and soul and body* be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Physical death does not end man’s existence. For a Christian, to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (II Corinthians 5:8).

The day will come when all will be resurrected. Jesus said in John 5:28-29, “Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.”

Man is not merely a biological machine. Our text this morning, supported by the testimony of the rest of Scripture, teaches that man has a spirit. Our physical bodies will some day die, but our spirit will live on. The men of Noah’s day faced a spiritual issue.

We also see from this passage that the men of Noah’s day were disobedient and unbelieving. Those who were alive in the days of Noah and who Christ

preached to by the spirit are described in verse 20 as, “disobedient.” Strong’s defines this word as “to disbelieve (willfully and perversely): — not believe, disobedient, obey not, unbelieving.”

What was the great sin of Noah’s day? It was not some form of sexual sin, or lying, or stealing, or even murder, though undoubtedly these sins were rampant. The great sin of Noah’s generation was disobedience that came out of unbelief.

The people of Noah’s day lived as if God did not exist. Genesis 6:5-6 describes the earth in the days before the flood, “And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And it repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart.”

Jesus gives more description in Matthew 24:38-39, “For as in the days that were before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noe entered into the ark, And knew not until the flood came, and took them all away.” They were just living their lives, going about business as usual, giving no thought to the God who created them. They were willfully unaware of their impending destruction until it was too late. “Until the flood came and took them all away.”

Note also that their disobedience imprisoned them. Verse 19 describes these spirits as currently “in prison.” Sin imprisons man. Disbelief and disobedience imprison man.

Jesus is often falsely represented as the poor, bleeding, begging Savior Who knocks ever so gently upon the door of your heart and begs to be let inside. That is not who Jesus is. Jesus is the victorious conqueror. He does not beg. He demands, and rightfully so.

He stands victorious over you, with the sword of the righteous wrath of God in His hand, and demands that you, a rebel against God, surrender. This offer is made out of God's incredible love for you. Not because you are worthy, but because He is worthy. Not for your glory, but for His glory.

Those who persist in rebellion. Those who refuse God's offer of mercy, grace, love, and adoption. Have chosen for themselves God's righteous wrath. It happens today just as it happened in the days of Noah. Verse 19 refers to such souls as "spirits in prison."

We also see that relatively few were spared God's judgment in the days of Noah. The last part of I Peter 3:20 says, "Few, that is, eight souls were saved by water." There were probably millions of people alive at the time of the flood. Only eight escaped God's judgment. Why were these eight spared? Genesis 6 tells us. Genesis 6:8 says, "But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord." Noah wasn't spared because he was righteous. Noah wasn't spared because he was holy. Noah was spared, ultimately, because of the grace of God.

In verse 18 God tells Noah, "With thee will I establish my covenant; and thou shalt come into the ark, thou, and thy sons, and thy wife, and thy sons' wives

with thee.” God gave Noah instructions to build the ark. God told Noah that he and his family would come into the ark and be spared from the flood. The ark was God’s provision for Noah and his family. Outside of the ark there was no escape from the judgment of God. Inside the ark, there was no danger. There was Divine protection from judgment, but only within the provision God had made.

Noah believed God and obeyed. Genesis 6:22 says, “Thus did Noah; according to all that God commanded him, so did he.” Noah believed God, therefore he obeyed. He heeded God’s warning and built the ark. We see this pattern all throughout Scripture. Faith and obedience go hand-in-hand and cannot be separated.

Why were only 8 spared? No one else believed God. They gave no thought to their Creator. They did not believe that judgment was coming. In the end, only eight souls were spared by the grace of God. Take a warning from this account. Beware of those who proclaim a wide gate and a broad way lead to God. Such is not the case. Jesus said in Matthew 7:14, “Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.”

The first thing we have looked at from this passage is what it teaches us about mankind. We see from our text that man is a spiritual being. We see that the men of Noah’s day were disobedient and disbelieving, and man’s nature hasn’t changed. And finally we saw that relatively few were spared God’s judgment in the days of Noah.

Next, this passage illustrates God's character. This passage illustrates that God is merciful. Christ preached to them in the Spirit. Verse 19 begins with the words, "By which also." This ties in with verse 18. I Peter 3:18 tells us that Christ was "quickened by the Spirit," the Holy Spirit. By the same spirit, the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ went and "preached" unto them.

God was under no obligation to warn these wicked men of their impending judgment. Psalm 19:1 says, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handiwork." Romans 1:18-21 lays out a profound argument against man's innocence: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. For the invisible things of him *from the creation of the world* are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened."

Though these verses had not been written yet, they were just as true in the days of Noah as they are in our day. Mankind is without excuse before God. Mankind will not be able to stand before God on the day of judgment and point a finger at Him and accuse Him of injustice. I won't be able to, you won't be able to,

and neither will the men of Noah's time. Mankind is without excuse before God because of the revelation of conscience, nature, and creation.

Yet God, in His great mercy, went even further in the days of Noah. He gave the men of Noah's day specific divine revelation. Christ revealed himself to them in the Spirit through preaching, presumably the preaching of Noah. God warned them. God gave them opportunity to repent. Noah preached righteousness for years and years and years before the flood came! See the mercy of God in this account!

The destruction of the wicked brings God no pleasure. In Ezekiel 33:11 God says, "As I live, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live." God is just, and will judge. Wicked men cannot escape the justice of God, but God is also merciful and loves to show mercy.

You are alive today because of the mercy of God. Don't scorn the mercy of God. Don't assume upon the mercy of God. Humbly accept the mercy of God. Call upon Him for salvation. He draws no pleasure from the death of the wicked.

We also see God's mercy in verse 20. Salvation was provided. Verse 20 says, "Eight souls were saved by water." What were they saved from? The flood. And what was the flood? God's righteous judgment upon the earth.

Everyone else died. Whole societies were totally wiped out. Potentially millions upon millions of people died. No one else survived. The ingenuity of man was not enough to overcome God's judgment. Man's will to live was not enough to overcome God's judgment. No one survived by building a tower tall enough to get

above the flood water. No one survived by clinging to a raft. Only eight souls were saved, and it was God that saved them.

How were they saved? Sometimes, when we consider the account of Noah, we take a very shallow, surface view. But this morning, let's really consider, "How was Noah and his family saved from the flood?"

First, the water had nothing to do with saving them. Some people latch on to the water in this verse and they pull it into verse 21 and apply it to Christian baptism. As if it is somehow water baptism, or grace plus water baptism that saves us. That's not true. That's not what the rest of Scripture teaches. That's not what this passage teaches. The water had nothing to do with saving Noah and His family. The water was God's judgment, not God's salvation. This passage does not teach baptismal regeneration.

Noah and his family were saved because they were in the ark. But don't take just a surface view of this. It is significant that they were saved because they were *in* the ark. It wasn't the ark that saved Noah and his family. God saved Noah and his family.

The ark wasn't Noah's idea. God didn't say, "Noah, I'm going to destroy the earth with a flood." And Noah thought, "Well, I had better build a boat that can survive the flood." That's not what happened.

God said, "Noah, I'm going to destroy the earth with a flood and everyone is going to die, but I am going to spare you and your family. Now build this ark."

God then told Noah how to build the ark. Noah believed, obeyed, and was saved from the flood. If Noah had built an ark, filled it with food and animals, and entered it with his family when the flood came; if he did all of this, but did it apart from God, Noah and his family would have died along with everyone else. It wasn't the ark that saved Noah. It was God that saved Noah. Don't insist upon finding a natural explanation for the miraculous. God saved Noah and his family from the flood.

The point of this account isn't to illustrate what an incredible ark Noah must have built. The point of this account is to illustrate the mercy of God! God provided a way of salvation. See in this the incredible mercy of God!

This passage also illustrates that God is longsuffering. We are told in verse 20, "The longsuffering of God waited in the days Noah." We live in a world of tremendous pain and suffering. We know, from the Scriptures, that all the pain and suffering in the world is a result of sin. Pain and suffering is a result of man's choice to sin. Pain and suffering is not a reflection upon God's character. Pain and suffering is a reflection upon man's character.

Pain and suffering is not a proof of God's wrath. Pain and suffering is proof of God's longsuffering, God's patience. God allowed us to choose, and we chose sin. And though this sin is an affront to God. Though our sin grieves Him. He withholds His righteous judgment, because He is longsuffering.

This is so clearly seen in the account of Noah. God determined that He would destroy the earth with a flood because of man's wickedness. And then He waited. And waited. And waited. For 120 years God waited in the time of Noah. See the incredible longsuffering nature of God.

But don't assume upon God's longsuffering. Nowhere does Scripture teach that God is ever-suffering. He is longsuffering. He is incredibly patient with us, His creation. But He will not suffer the sins of men forever. You have no guarantee of tomorrow. You have no guarantee on the rest of this day. Don't assume upon the longsuffering of God. Don't assume that God will suffer your sins any longer.

God is merciful, God is longsuffering, and God is holy. Look again at the very end of verse 19, "The spirits in prison." As we study theology proper, the doctrine of God, from the Word of God, we learn so many wonderful and comforting truths about God. Scripture teaches us that God is love. God is gracious. As we have seen already in this passage, God is merciful and longsuffering. But if we only teach these doctrines of God, we have created an idol. If the god you serve is only loving and patient and gracious and merciful, then it is not the God of the Bible. If the god you serve would never condemn anyone to an eternity in hell, then he is not the God of the Bible. You cannot honestly claim the title of Bible-believing Christian if you pick and choose the attributes of God.

Verse 19 illustrates that God's wrath is exercised against the ungodly. Those wicked men who rejected the righteous preaching of Christ through the Holy Spirit

in the days of Noah are now “in prison.” Because God is holy and He will not tolerate the wickedness of man forever.

People say things like, “God hates sin but loves the sinner.” I understand the sentiment that is behind that saying, but we need to be very careful with statements like that. Listen to Psalm 5:5, “The foolish shall not stand in thy sight: thou hatest all workers of iniquity.” David didn’t say, “Thou hatest all iniquity.” David said, “Thou hatest all workers of iniquity.” The next verse, Psalm 5:6 says, “The Lord will abhor the bloody and deceitful man.” Psalm 11:5 says, “The Lord trieth the righteous: but the wicked and him that loveth violence his soul hateth.”

I’m not trying to discount the love of God. God forbid I discount God’s love. But God’s love must be taught with a biblical balance, and never at the expense of God’s holiness.

Do you want to see the holiness of God? Look at the total destruction caused by the flood in Noah’s day. That’s how holy God is. The holiness of God was so outraged by the wickedness of man that God destroyed His creation. He totally wiped it out. And the wicked men of Noah’s day are in prison now and for all eternity, under the righteous wrath of God because they rejected Christ and persisted in their wickedness.

Does the holiness of God make you uncomfortable? It should. It should terrify you. It terrifies me. There is a perfectly holy God and you will have to give

an account of your life to Him. Fear God! Flee from your sin! Fall before the cross of Jesus Christ! Salvation is in Jesus Christ alone.

I Peter 3:19-20 is a powerful illustration. It teaches us much about man. It reminds us that man is a spiritual being. We were reminded of the disbelief and disobedience of the men in Noah's day. And we were reminded that few were spared God's judgment in the days of Noah.

This passage also teaches us much about God. Here we see God's mercy. We see God's longsuffering (His patience). And we see God's holiness. Peter then makes application from this in verses 21 and 22.

## II. The Application (v. 21-22).

Verse 21 in the King James Version begins with the words: "The like figure." Other translations begin this verse different ways, but the word that is being translated there Strong's defines as, "representative, counterpart, or figure." This tells us that the previous passage, verses 19 and 20, was an illustration. God's judgment upon the earth in the flood and the salvation of Noah and his family in the ark is meant to illustrate spiritual truth for us.

Verse 21 goes on and says, "Baptism doth also now save us . . . by the resurrection of Jesus Christ." This is the real meat of our text this morning. This is

the point Peter has been after all along. This is why the Holy Spirit inspired Peter to give us this illustration from Noah's time. Let's look very carefully at what is being taught here.

First, we have this word: "Baptism." This is not talking about the ordinance of water baptism. How do we know this isn't talking about water baptism?

First, look at the testimony of the text. There is a sort of parenthetical statement here in the middle of verse 21 where Peter says, "Not the putting away of the filth of the flesh." It's almost as if God knew people would struggle with this passage, so He explains it right here.

We can also look at the testimony of the rest of Scripture to know that this verse is not teaching that water baptism saves us. In John 14:6 Jesus said, "I am the way." Not, "Water is the way." In the moments before Jesus died upon the cross He cried out, "It is finished." (John 19:30). If man's redemption still required water baptism, Jesus could not really say that. The penitent thief on the cross was not baptized, yet Jesus told him he would be in paradise. (Luke 23:43).

We can also look at history and our own experiences, and that combined with Scripture, shows us that this verse cannot teach that water baptism saves. Multitudes of people who have been baptized in all sorts of churches have gone on to live wicked lives. Lives that give a testimony of having never been truly born-again. If water baptism truly saves, then that could not be the case. This verse is not speaking about the ordinance of water baptism.

If not the ordinance of water baptism, then what is this verse talking about? Look again at that parenthetical statement in the middle of verse 21: “Not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God.” The word here that is translated as “answer” is used in a legal sense like an appeal.<sup>1</sup> The best illustration may be to read another verse where this same word is used.

In Acts 7:59, Steven is being stoned. Listen to what Acts 7:59 says, “And they stoned Steven, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” It says Steven was, “calling upon God.” A plea to God. The same word that is translated there as “calling” is used in our text for “appeal” or “answer.

That really sheds a lot of light on I Peter 3:21. The baptism Peter is talking about here isn’t water baptism, but an answer, an appeal, a plea, a calling upon God. Baptism now saves us. Not a baptism into water, but a spiritual baptism into Jesus Christ. John MacArthur commented on this verse, “What saves a person plagued by sin and a guilty conscience is not some external rite, but the agreement with God to get into the ark of safety, the Lord Jesus, by faith in His death and resurrection.”<sup>2</sup>

Consider the parallels between Noah and the ark and our baptism in Jesus Christ. Noah was saved by the grace of God. Noah found grace in the eyes of the

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<sup>1</sup> *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, p. 61

<sup>2</sup> *John MacArthur Study Bible*, Notes on I Peter 3:21.

Lord. So we are saved only by the grace of God. God doesn't save us because we are righteous. God doesn't save us because we are holy. The clear, consistent testimony of Scripture is that we are saved only by the grace of God. If you are not a Christian, cast aside your works and your righteousness, and cry out for the grace of God! If you are a Christian, in the midst of suffering, take hope and be encouraged as you are reminded that you are a recipient of the grace of God.

The ark was God's provision for Noah. God provided the ark to save Noah and his family from the flood. Noah didn't dream this up on his own. He didn't plan it himself. He received God's instructions, believed, obeyed, and was saved from the flood.

God has made provision for us in Jesus Christ. We could not make provision for ourselves. We could not dream up a way to escape God's righteous judgment against sin. We could devise no plan to save ourselves. But like Noah, we have received instruction from God. If we believe and obey, we will be saved.

Where are you in that process? Maybe you are only at the point where you have heard God's instruction. You know that there is righteousness and sin. You know that you are sinful. You know that one day you will have to stand before God and give an account for your sinful life. The Bible teaches us that conscience, nature, and creation reveal this to us, but man surpasses this knowledge in unrighteousness.

But God has gone even further and given clear revelation about the exact nature of man's sin and the only way of salvation in Jesus Christ. Maybe you have heard God's instruction, but you have done nothing with it. Like the disobedient and unbelieving men in the days of Noah, you ignore God's instruction. You go on living your life as if God doesn't exist. Take warning: God's longsuffering for sin will not endure forever. Don't ignore the revelation of God!

Maybe you are like Noah, and upon hearing the instruction of God, by the grace of God, you believed and obeyed. If that is where you are, then rest in the provision of God: the righteousness of His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. Salvation is in Jesus Christ.

The ark protected Noah from the water of God's judgment. The water fell upon the ark, but did not reach Noah and his family within. In the same way, when we are in Christ, we are protected from the righteous judgment of God. God's judgment fell upon His Son, Jesus Christ. If we are in Him, God's judgment will not reach us. There is provision and protection and salvation in Jesus Christ.

How do we know God is satisfied with the sacrifice of Jesus Christ? The end of verse 21 tells us: "by the resurrection of Jesus Christ." This is where our hope rests. Because Christ was raised, we have assurance of a clear conscience before God.

Verse 22 reveals to us the full triumph of Jesus Christ. First it says, “Who is gone into heaven.” After His resurrection, Jesus did not stay on the earth. He ascended into heaven. Not as a spirit, but as a man in a glorified body.

Next, it says that Jesus “is on the right hand of God.” He has a place of prominence and power. God the Father has greatly honored God the Son.

Finally, verse 22 says, “Angels and authorities and powers being made subject unto him.” All nature of heavenly beings are under His authority. Jesus was given a position of great power and authority. All of this flowed out of His suffering. As Christ was vindicated through the unjust suffering He endured, so will Christians one day be vindicated.

This morning we have looked at I Peter 3:19-22. There is so much in this passage about sin and salvation, about the nature man, about the nature of God the Father, and about the nature and ministry of Jesus Christ. But the point of this passage is that salvation is in Jesus Christ.

Outside of Christ, there is judgment. In Christ, there is grace.

Outside of Christ, there is no hope. In Christ, there is no danger.

Outside of Christ, we are the disobedient and unbelieving enemies of God.  
In Christ, we are the adopted sons and daughters of God.

For the unbeliever, this passage delivers a strong warning. For the believer, this passage delivers great hope and assurance. And the message for both is the same: Salvation is in Jesus Christ.