

Living Righteous in a Hostile World: Remembering the Spirit of Christ

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Date: 28 August 2011

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[0:00] I'm going to read all the way to the end of the chapter.

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but made alive by the Spirit.

By whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient, when once the divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water.

There's also an antitype which now saves us. Baptism. Not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him.

All right? Interesting passage. Martin Luther, not Martin Luther King, but Martin Luther, the great reformer, he wrote this about the passage I just read.

[1:23] A wonderful text is this, he said, but a more obscure passage, perhaps, than any other in the New Testament, so that I do not know for a certainty just what Peter means.

Now, that's coming from Luther, and, you know, Luther was an astute theologian, and for him to say what he said about this particular passage, I think gives us some sense as to just how difficult it is to interpret.

There are a lot of views on what this passage means, and specifically the phrase found in verse 19, preached to the spirits in prison, and that's going to be our focus this morning.

And the second one that appears in verse 21, Baptism now saves us. Those are two interesting things that Peter says here, and difficult to understand.

Now, I really believe that his words were very clear to his original readers, those who read his letter the first time.

[2:27] I think it was probably very clear to them. He didn't have to explain it, they knew what he meant. But, for whatever reason, they have been difficult to understand in the generations of readers that have come after, including our generation today.

Now, what I'm not going to do this morning is to spend a lot of time just laying out there all the various views about this text, and kind of discuss what these views are, and how maybe they're wrong, and just kind of get bogged down into that.

I'm not planning on doing that. Now, I will mention some of them. We will talk and discuss some of them this morning. I think we're going to have to. But then I'm going to tell you what I believe Peter meant.

Okay. And you can agree with me or not agree with me, because there is some openness to interpretation here, and some really great and respected theologians have positions that I have not taken.

All right? So, you're going to be free to make up your mind. I don't think I would normally say that in the course of preaching. I don't think preachers ought to say, Well, you know, I might be wrong about this. I don't think we ought to say that very often.

[3:46] But I can say this about this passage. Now, I don't believe I'm wrong, and you'll have to decide, but there are varying views here, and we're going to talk about some of them.

And more importantly, though, not only am I going to just share with you what I believe Peter meant here in this text, what we're doing here this morning is more than just simply teaching, but I'm going to make an application.

I need to apply to our lives what Peter has said here in this letter. All right? Now, getting to the text, according to verse 17, and I didn't read that a moment ago, but it really is the passage, as I mentioned last week, that sets us up for what Peter is going to say through to the end of this chapter.

But according to verse 17, he says, it is better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

That identifies the theme here, what Peter's subject is. In fact, that really is the subject of the entire letter.

[4:57] It's persecution. It's Christian suffering. Suffering for doing good, rather than for doing evil. And I mentioned last week that this suffering for Christ should be, according to verse 17, should be both ordained, that is, the will of God, and it should be undeserved.

You ought not to be persecuted or suffer because you've done bad things. You're to suffer for doing good. And so, in that sense, it's undeserved. All right? Now, then, starting with verse 18, and then continuing on to the end of the chapter, Peter presents Christ as the explanation of this.

He expands upon this. I guess we could say that he is going to use Christ as the example, or an illustration. And how does he do it?

He presents Christ as the victor. He presents Christ's victory in suffering, in his suffering.

And in doing that, he calls us to remember certain things about Christ while we suffer for doing good. All right? So, his intent is to cause us to remember Christ.

[6:11] And these things that we're to remember about the Lord Jesus Christ are going to tell us, inform us, concerning why we too will most likely suffer.

And not only that, but also will help us in our suffering for doing good. And strengthen us in our suffering for doing good. And I said there were five of them here in this passage.

Five things to remember. We saw two of them last week. And we're going to see another one today.

The third one. And I'm not going to be able to finish the text this morning because there's just a lot that needs to be said about this third thing that we're to remember as we're suffering.

Not only is this third thing based upon a passage or a certain part of the text that is difficult or controversial, but the application of it is very important.

And we need to spend some time on this. Now, there are five things I said. Two of them we saw last week. And just to remind you, we're to remember, first of all, the suffering of our victorious Savior.

We're to remember His suffering.

[7:21] That's what Peter said in verse 18. Christ also suffered. And so we have then a fellowship with His suffering. And we're to remember that. When we suffer for doing good, that Christ also suffered and we are in fellowship with Him in His suffering.

The second thing is, remember the salvation of our victorious Savior. Remember the salvation of our victorious Savior. He says in verse 18, For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God.

That's salvation. To bring us to God. And how is He going to do it? And how did He do it? By being put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the Spirit. So the death and resurrection is how we are brought safe to God.

Alright, so it's our salvation. And so in the midst of our suffering for Christ, Christian persecution, we're to remember that Christ also suffered.

And we're to remember our salvation that we have in Christ. And now we're ready for the third thing to remember and to remember when we find ourselves suffering for doing good.

[8:32] And here's the third one. Remember the Spirit of our victorious Savior. Remember the Spirit of our victorious Savior.

Now let's just grab the last part of verse 18. I read it a moment ago. Let's grab the last part of it and then move our way on into verses 19 and 20.

Where Peter says, being put to death, he's speaking of Christ, being put to death in the flesh, but made alive, do you see that?

Made alive by the Spirit. By whom, this is the way the New King James Version reads, by whom also he, that's Christ, went and preached to the spirits in prison.

Who, formerly, these prisoners, formerly were disobedient. When once the divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah. And we're going to stop right there for a moment.

[9:33] So here is this difficult passage. We finally have come to it. He went and preached to the spirits in prison.

All right, there it is. Now I think, clearly, we need to first come to some understanding, some conclusion about what Peter meant here. Before any application can be made.

In fact, that really is true of all passages in the Bible, all of God's Word, we need to find out what the author meant. Exactly what he meant. Not only to his readers then, but also to readers now.

And then, of course, then we can make the application to our lives. So what did Peter mean? Well, the answers to four questions will help us discover what Peter meant.

And they're very simple questions. In fact, this is, you know, kind of the standard way to approach a certain passage or any kind of problem. And it's this. The when, to whom, and what, and why of Jesus' preaching.

[10:38] That is, when did he preach to the prisoners? To whom did he preach? What did he preach? What was the substance of it?

And why? Why did he preach? That is, to what end? Very simple. Now, if we can answer those four questions, and I'm going to answer them the way I believe it to be, but when we answer those four questions, then we're going to understand not only what he meant, but then we'll be ready to find out how it applies to us.

All right, so first of all, when did Jesus preach to the spirits in prison? Was it sometime in the distant past? You know, prior to his incarnation?

A pre-incarnate, preaching of Christ? Or was it after his death on the cross, but before his resurrection?

So the idea of being a kind of disembodied Jesus going somewhere in the Spirit to preach to certain people somewhere? Is that the idea? Or was it after his resurrection?

[11:50] After the resurrection? After his death and resurrection? Either before he appeared to his disciples, or sometime after his ascension? Remember when he stood there with his disciples and after he gave them a commission?

The Bible in Acts chapter 1 says that he ascended up into heaven, caught up into the clouds. Was it during his ascension, sometime before he got all the way to heaven, did he go somewhere then and preach to some prisoners, some spirits in prison?

Is it that? So you see how complicated this can be. Here's what I believe and why. And let's just walk through this. When Peter says in verse 18, and this again is in the New King James translation, something similar in the King James, though you'll find it a little different in the other translations, but he said this, being put to death, he's speaking of Christ, being put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the Spirit.

When we read that here, and if you have a King James or a New King James and even NIV, you might notice that the word Spirit is capitalized.

Now it's not that way in the New American Standard or the English Standard version, but in those three it is capitalized and I believe, now hold on, don't throw something at me, but I believe the translators are wrong.

[13:22] It should not be capitalized. That's not saying that the Bible has errors, okay? Okay? Because Jesus certainly was raised from the dead by the power of the Spirit, the Holy Spirit. That is certainly true, but that's just not what Peter's talking about here.

Because you see, to capitalize Spirit there would suggest that he's talking about the Holy Spirit. But the problem is, Spirit, the word Spirit, is in contrast to the word flesh.

And the opposite of the flesh or the counterpart to flesh is not the Holy Spirit. You see. And so, Peter's talking about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And so the idea here is that Christ died on the cross, but he died to the natural physical sphere of existence.

The flesh. He died to that. And so we could translate it literally or expand it and say he was put to death in respect to the flesh. All right, that part's simple.

[14:27] What about the other side of it? Christ was raised. This is his resurrection. He was raised and given life, the Bible says here, as to the spiritual sphere of existence.

One day we will also experience that kind of resurrection into the spiritual sphere of existence. But this is the resurrection of Christ.

And so we could translate it here to kind of expand it and it would rightly read made alive in respect to the Spirit. So he was made, he was put to death in respect to the flesh, but made alive in respect to the Spirit.

All right? Now, stay with me here. Then in verse 19, Peter says, and this again is the New King James, by whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison.

Or more accurately, this should be by which. By which or in which.

[15 : 39] And so, that is, Christ was made alive in respect to the Spirit in which, that is, in the Spirit, he went somewhere and preached.

Now, that's pretty straightforward, pretty clear, I think, from the text. And when did he do it? When did he go and preach in the Spirit, in the spiritual realm of existence?

Well, Peter tells us when by telling us where. And it's very plain in verse 20, when, in fact, the word when is there. When, once the divine long-suffering waited, and when was that?

Well, what does it say in the Bible? In the days of Noah. In the days of Noah. See here, this is a reference to the preaching of the Spirit of Christ through Noah.

Noah. And so, when Noah preached, way back there, just before the flood, when Noah preached, and the Bible says he preached for 120 years, as a matter of fact, when Noah preached, the Spirit of Christ was in him preaching through him to the people of the world prior to the flood.

[17 : 03] I think that's very clear. Now, the question is, why would Peter first highlight the death and resurrection of Christ, which was an event that took place at a certain place in a certain time?

Why would he reference the death and resurrection of Christ and then take his readers back to another place and time way back there in the past?

That is, back to Noah's day. Why would Peter do that? Well, I think the answer is because of his theme. His theme is persecution.

It's suffering for doing good. And the disobedient that he mentions here in this text, the disobedient in Noah's day mocked the preaching of righteousness.

They mocked it. They mocked Noah. And they ridiculed Noah for obeying God. God told Noah to build an ark when it hadn't even rained on the earth ever.

[18 : 06] He said, build this ark because I'm going to send a flood. I'm going to destroy the entire world. And that's what he told Noah and Noah obeyed. And he told others about that and began to proclaim this way of salvation through the ark.

And people ridiculed Noah for obeying God and preaching that others should obey God. They ridiculed him just like they did to those in Peter's day.

Peter's readers who were also preaching the gospel. And just like they do to us today.

You understand where we're going here? Peter's theme is persecution. And so he brings the death and resurrection of Christ. Christ. He died in respect to the flesh and he was made alive in respect to the spirit and it was in that spiritual realm that Jesus also appeared back in Noah's day and preached through Noah this preacher of righteousness so that the people would hear the good news then.

And this Noah was persecuted just like we are today. You see. You understand? He the same spirit of Christ who was present in Noah's righteous living and preaching was present in the righteous living and preaching of Peter's first readers ones who were being persecuted and he's present in the living and preaching of us today in the midst of our persecution.

[19 : 53] So I think that answers when. The second question is to whom? We've really already answered it but I want to take these methodically. To whom did Jesus preach?

Well verse 19 tells us that he preached to the spirits in prison. In prison. That's exactly what he said. Now the pulpit commentary and I'm not going to list all these but it lists two dozen twenty-four different views about this phrase preached to the spirits in prison.

Now many of them are very similar. Some of them are somewhat the same but a little bit different take but there are twenty-four of them at least. Different ideas about what Peter meant here.

Now there are though when you boil it down there really are three major views. Okay. The first one. Jesus descended into hell and preached to the spirits of those who perished in the flood.

Those who perished back there before the flood. That's one view. He descended to hell preached to the spirits of those who perished in the flood. And there are a number of variations to this and all of them have a lot of problems.

[21:16] some say for example that Jesus descended into hell and he preached the gospel and gave the dead a second chance to believe. That boggles the mind doesn't it?

And yet there are many who believe that. You have a lot of problems with that view if you want to consider the truth of the rest of scripture. Okay. So we need to throw that one out. Some say that Jesus didn't descend into hell per se but he descended into an in-between place.

called Sheol or Abraham's bosom. There are a lot of conservative Bible-believing theologians who believe in this in-between place where all those who died went.

That is prior to the resurrection of Christ coming of Christ but it was a place called Abraham's bosom had a great gulf affixed between not golf gulf.

On one side was paradise the other side was the place of torment. I mean this is a real view that some have. You'd be surprised that some of the popular commentators that you might read that are conservative hold this view.

[22:32] And so what Jesus did then when he died and he went in the spirit to Sheol Abraham's bosom and he went to the paradise side and he led the captivity captive captivity captive he led them out that is the righteous dead out of their prison.

There are all kinds of problems with this view because in order for this to work you've got to prove there was such a place and the Bible just doesn't support it.

Third some say that and this is still under view number one that Jesus descended and preached to the dead. Some say that Jesus did descend to hell but he did not preach the gospel there rather he proclaimed his victory and his doom to all those dead in hell.

Now the problem with that is why would he do that? Why would he need to do that? They already know they're doomed. They're in hell. Is he going to go to the door of hell and say no?

No, no, no. You missed it. No, I don't think this view is correct. The second major view and if you have a MacArthur study Bible and I know a bunch of you do you're going to discover that this is John MacArthur's view.

[23:59] It has almost become sacrilegious to disagree with John MacArthur in our day. But I do disagree with him here. And his view is basically this that the spirits in prison refer to fallen angels to whom Jesus proclaimed his victory and their doom.

That's a very short answer to the full view. And those who hold this view say, including John MacArthur, that these are wicked angels that existed prior to the flood.

in fact, not long after the days of Adam and Eve, who cohabitated and mated with the daughters of man.

You can go back to Genesis chapter 6 and the Bible speaks of the sons of God coming together with the daughters of man.

and the idea here is that these sons of God are fallen angels and they united themselves with the daughters of man. And the result was a very wicked generation, wickedness on the earth that led to the flood.

[25:17] And so these wicked angels back prior to the flood were incarcerated in, by God, incarcerated into a prison, Tartarus, to be held there, captive for what they did.

And so then after Jesus' resurrection and before his ascension, he goes there, visits these prisoners, these angels, these fallen angels, and he pronounces their doom, their eternal doom.

That's an oversimplification of the view, but that's basically it. the third view is, and you've already guessed it, is mine.

Well, not just mine. I didn't come up with it, but I believe it's correct. And that is, again, that the Spirit of Christ preached the gospel through Noah, and he preached it to the people who lived on this earth prior to the flood who are now in prison.

They weren't in prison when Jesus, through Noah, preached the gospel. They weren't in prison.

They were living and they had the opportunity to respond to the message. But because they rejected it, they're now in prison.

[26:41] And this seems, I think, to be the plainest reading of the passage. Look at verse 19 and 20 again. Let's just kind of walk through this. By which, again, not whom, but which, by which also he, Jesus, went and preached.

That's the word in the English. It's keroso. In the Greek, it means to be a herald, to herald, to proclaim. Keroso. And he proclaimed to the spirits in prison.

That's what he says. And then these spirits are identified. Who, who, and who are these spirits? When did they live?

Who formerly, now you need to note that word, formerly were disobedient.

Need to note that word also. When, once the divine long suffering waited in the days of Noah while the ark was being prepared. So the spirit of Christ preached through Noah and he preached to the people of Noah's day.

[27 : 57] They were not in prison then. Okay, not in Noah's day, but they are now in prison. And why are they now in prison? Because they did not obey the message.

They didn't obey the good news, the gospel that Jesus, or that Noah preached, or the spirit of Christ preached through Noah. And so through Noah, Jesus preached the good news and demanded repentance, but these people in that day are now in prison, the prison of hell.

And why? Because formerly, that is in the days of Noah, when the divine long suffering waited for them, Noah preached for 120 years, and they heard the good news and they disobeyed it.

they rejected it. The good news. And we're going to draw all this together in a minute, but this makes the answer to the third question fairly easy.

What did Jesus preach? Well, what did Noah preach? Do we know anything about that? Well, maybe not so much actual sermons and outlines and such as that, but in 2 Peter chapter 2 verse 5, Peter again going back to Noah and he says, God did not spare the ancient world, but saved Noah, one of eight people.

[29 : 26] And Peter says, he calls him a preacher of righteousness. That's what Noah preached. Righteousness.

And he goes on bringing in the flood on the world of the ungodly. The ungodly world. Those who did not respond to the preaching of Noah.

The preaching of righteousness. Noah proclaimed God's righteousness to the world of his day and therefore the need to repent. That's the what.

And then finally, why? Why did Jesus preach through Noah? Well, why did Noah preach? Why did the Spirit of Christ preach through Noah?

Why did Noah preach? To what end? Or for what purpose? And there can only be one answer. His desire, his intent, his end goal, his aim in preaching was to get people on the ark.

[30 : 32] Get on the ark. He was preaching, he was proclaiming to a sinful world, the sinful world of Noah's day, he was proclaiming to them the only way of escape from God's holy wrath, that is the ark.

And the ark was God's provision of salvation. It prefigured Christ, certainly we'll get into this next time, the antitype of Christ, our salvation, our ark.

But it prefigured that, and the ark was the only way of escape from the judgment of God, a judgment that would be carried out by the waters of the flood. And while the ark was being built there, the possibility, now listen to me, the possibility of escape existed for all those who would believe.

Oh, yes, it did. That's why Noah was preaching. Noah preached for 120 years, the Bible tells us. and no one except his family believed it.

You say he must have been a pretty pitiful preacher. As I heard Adrian Rogers say years ago, he said, don't ever criticize a man who got his family on the ark.

[31 : 52] All his family were saved. That's successful preaching. No one else believed. and they all perished in the flood, the flood of God's righteous judgment.

Now, I think this helps us understand Peter's intended meaning in the passage. But what about its application to us? I mean, it needs to be applied here.

And remember that Peter is writing to persecuted suffering Christians. Don't ever forget that. I mean, all throughout the letter. Don't ever lose sight of this because it helps us understand Peter's intent.

He's writing to persecuted believers. And they're enduring a level of persecution that you and I have never ever experienced nor are we likely to in our life.

So, remember that. And he calls them to remember something about Christ. He keeps bringing Christ to them. And he wants them to remember something about him.

[32 : 59] And he says, remember the spirit of our victorious Savior, who in the spirit preached through Noah a gospel of salvation.

And here is what we need to learn from this. Don't ever think that Jesus' life and his ministry, don't think of it as something confined to space and time.

If you're not careful, you'll think of Jesus and his ministry and his preaching only in terms of the time he lived on this earth. He's not confined and never has been confined to that and Peter's not believing that.

In fact, in chapter 1 of this letter, in verse 11, he placed Jesus, the Spirit of Christ, in the lives of the prophets as well.

He said that the Spirit of Christ was in them testifying beforehand of the sufferings of Christ. That is, they were testifying of the coming of Christ and his passion, his sacrifice, and then the glories that would follow, is what Peter said, that is, the provision of salvation through him.

[34 : 11] The prophets were preaching that. And Peter says it was the Spirit of Christ preaching through them. And then he goes all the way back to Noah and he says the same thing there about him.

The Spirit of Christ in Noah. Jesus, you see, is there preaching through Noah, through the prophets. Noah was persecuted.

The prophets certainly were persecuted. Most of them died for what they preached. And Peter's readers are preaching the gospel and they are dying and suffering because of what they're preaching.

And the Spirit of Christ is in them preaching and he is here today. as well. Preaching. He's up here right now. The Spirit of Christ preaching through this frail frail man.

And he's there with you speaking. living out his life in you, through you, speaking, proclaiming the righteousness of God through your life.

[35 : 35] Don't ever forget that no matter how much you may suffer for it. I tell you, Jesus promised that he would be with us to the end of the age.

And so no matter where you are, right now, you're right here in Bartlesville. Most of you live here in Bartlesville. Some of you live in Dewey.

no matter where you are, Bartlesville, Dewey, Tulsa, any of their surrounding community, no matter where you are, no matter what you go through, no matter what you might suffer, the Spirit of Christ is in you speaking, speaking to a world, a world of unbelievers.

And so no matter where you go on this planet, be it China, communist China, Russia, Nigeria, where Christians are enduring intense persecution, Afghanistan, Iran, Syria, any of the many Muslim nations, no matter where, or if you're just right here, the Spirit of Christ not only lives in you, but He speaks through you and preaches through you.

And as to your persecutors, I think this is implied also, as to the persecutors of Peter's readers, and as to our persecutors, their destiny is prison, eternal prison.

[37 : 30] And one day, we will be vindicated for our righteousness in Christ. and all that we have been preaching and speaking and living out will be revealed as true.

And our persecutors will be in prison if they do not believe. That's what Peter's talking about here. That's what he wants us to remember.

Do you know, I think there's another important application. It's implied in the text, but that in no way makes it less true.

And it is, this application is for those of you here today who have not yet repented and turned to Christ, trusted Him as your Lord and Savior.

The application is to you. And here's what this text says to you. That it is better to obey the gospel and suffer for it in this life than it is to disobey the gospel and to be cast into prison, the prison of hell forever and ever.

[39 : 00] That's what this also says to us. In the days of Noah, God was gracious.

We get that from what Peter wrote here. The divine longing suffering God was gracious in that day. He waited patiently. 120 years he waited. In fact, really longer than that.

When Enoch's son Methuselah was born, Enoch gave Methuselah a name that means basically in the end, or when I die, the end will come.

You know that Methuselah died just before the flood. How long did Methuselah live? How long live? 969 years.

[40 : 16] According to biblical record, he lived longer than any man on this earth. A testimony to the patience and longsuffering of God.

[illegible]