

Spirits in Prison

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[0 : 00] Let's turn again to the chapter we read in chapter 3 of 1 Peter and on into chapter 4.

I'm not going to read it again, but it's the section from verse 18 and through to the end of verse 6, just looking at particularly the latter part very briefly.

Chapter 3, verse 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.

And then it says, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, and so on. Now this last section here of this chapter, I suppose, provides us with one of the key verses of the Bible that speaks to us of the substitutionary nature of Christ's work and sacrifice.

But it also brings before us one of the most debated verses in the Bible, particularly that one about who are the spirits in prison. Now Peter, as we know, has been talking a lot about suffering and the suffering of the Christian.

[1 : 26] And one of the hardest things for us, or one of the hardest things to bear regarding suffering, is when you suffer for doing good. If you suffer for doing evil, well, you can expect that.

But if you suffer for doing good, that's difficult often to understand and to take. But Peter is saying, when you become a Christian, you ought to be a person who is bringing good and doing good in society.

Because there ought to be a person who is bringing good in society.

And we must never forget that. The world hated Christ. He had three years of a public ministry, and that was as much as they could take.

If they had been able to get rid of Jesus sooner than that, they would have. They were always looking for an opportunity to get rid of him. The Bible tells us that.

[2 : 49] So it really is quite an extraordinary thing that the only perfect, spotless passion to walk in this fallen world was a passion that the world couldn't cope with, couldn't handle, and couldn't wait to get rid of.

So Jesus has said elsewhere, if they hated me, the world will also hate you. And that's really part of the theme that Peter follows through.

And he says, by the very nature of following Jesus and being like Jesus, you will experience problems, difficulties, troubles, and suffering.

Now, as we know, and we've seen that, this was a time of real suffering. The early church experienced the literal fires of persecution. They knew what it was like, just as in some parts of this world today, the Christian is really suffering real persecution.

But so it was in the early days. But then Peter really is saying, and he keeps going back to this, he says, yes, you're suffering, but let's look again at Jesus. And that's, he's been speaking so often about it.

[4 : 04] And when we come into chapter 4, particularly at verse 12, suffering, we see that section of suffering as a Christian. But here, as Peter so often does, he says, let's focus upon Jesus.

For Christ also suffered. And so he tells us here that Christ suffered, and he tells us that he suffered in the flesh. In other words, he suffered in his humanity.

He suffered in his human nature. The body that Jesus had was an actual physical body. So that every blow, and every nail, and every beating, and everything that Jesus experienced, he would have felt it in the same way as you and I would have felt it.

It was in his flesh, in his literal body. And we must never think that it was simply the appearance of a body that Jesus had. It was an actual, a real body.

And so Jesus experienced this in his flesh, but he was made alive in his spirit. His body died, but his soul went immediately into glory, into the presence of the Lord, into the presence of the Father.

[5 : 23] And his body, although his body went under the power of death, yet the body, as we know, was kept from corruption. It was a remarkable thing that happened, because that's one of the awful things that happens when death occurs, is that corruption, the decay, sets in.

But Christ's body was kept from that. However, we know that after three days, his body also rose on the third day. And we know how the powers that be had done everything to make sure that there would be no resurrection.

It's very interesting. People highlight that. It's very interesting that the powers that be, Jesus' enemies, feared something might happen.

They didn't really believe something would happen, but they were scared of it, because Jesus kept saying he was going to rise from the dead. And yet his disciples weren't looking for a resurrection. They were defeated, beaten, broken men, hiding behind locked doors. So it's very interesting that the powers that be, the enemies of Christ, were afraid that there might be something happening.

[6 : 38] They even thought maybe the disciples will come and steal the body. So that's why they put that great big stone by the tomb, and why they put an armed guard there to prevent anybody coming from stealing the body of Jesus, and then people to go around and say, he is risen.

But the Bible shows us that that's exactly what had happened. And so, to the confusion of everybody, Jesus rose from the dead.

And you know, that's the wonderful thing is that what happened to Jesus is the guarantee will happen to us as well. When we go to our grave, we've said that often enough before.

We often talk about the finality of the grave. It isn't. In one respect, it is. There is something terribly final about it. And there's something very sad and very powerful when a grave is filled in and the turf is rolled over.

It does speak of a finality. But it's not. Because there's to be a resurrection. The graves, every grave is to open. And the grave will give up its dead.

[7 : 50] And it's an amazing thought. And Jesus is the proof. And the believers, we know, will rise first. It's an amazing thing. The bodies of the believers will rise first. Just as Christ rose, so they will rise as well.

Amazing. Wonderful. But this verse tells us that he died that he might bring us to God. That he might bring us to God.

And isn't that wonderful? Because we didn't want God. By nature, we didn't want God. Or there might be, because of a particular upbringing, a kind of a notion towards God and saying to ourselves, Yes, I know we need God in some way or other.

But there isn't within the heart of man there is an inbuilt rebellion against God. And that is why when a person is challenged with regard to Jesus Christ, challenged regarding their salvation, there's a natural reaction saying, No, no, leave me alone.

Naturally speaking, we don't want Christ to rule in our heart. We want to be boss. We want to rule our own lives. We want to be in charge.

[9 : 08] It's a self-interest, the self that is within us. So we don't want to submit to the authority, to the rule, to the kingship of Christ.

That is how we are naturally. But this is one of the reasons, or this is that we could almost say, the very reason that Jesus died was in order to bring us to God.

So that rather than running away from God, we begin to run to Him. That's what happens when God begins to work in our heart.

That word, drawn to God. There's a growing interest in the things of God. There's a growing desire that we be right with God.

We become conscious that we are sinners. We become conscious that things are not right, that we need to get right with God. So this is one of the things that Jesus, that we could say the main thing that Jesus has done, is to bring us back, because there is no way back to God apart from what Jesus did.

[10 : 19] For Christ also suffered once for sins that He might bring, that the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God. And we see why Christ suffered for our sins.

See, that's a big problem. That's why we're away from God. Your sins, the Bible says, have separated between you and God. The big problem I have, you have, in your life, is your sin.

Our sins keep us from God. Our sins create this huge, have made this great barrier between ourselves and God. And our sins have to be dealt with.

And that's why Jesus died, in order to take our sin upon Himself. This is what this verse is talking about, the whole substitutionary nature of Jesus' work.

That He took our sin upon Himself. Isn't that amazing? All your sin. Everything that you've ever done.

[11:23] Everything that you've ever thought. Everything that you've ever said. Everything that you've ever omitted from doing. All acts of transgression.

Every single thing. The original corruption of your whole nature, which is instinctive rebellion against God. He took all that upon Himself.

All your guilt. Everything. There is not one sin undiscovered anywhere about you. Past, present, or future.

But Jesus has taken it all upon Himself. That is the amazing thing. And it is through that work that we are brought to God.

We are made right with God. That's what keeps us from God. It's our sin. And Jesus says, I'm taking it away. And that's what it tells us here.

[12:18] That for Christ also suffered once for sins. The righteous for the unrighteous. And we know that that amazing transaction took place where His righteousness was put to our account.

So that when God looks upon us, yes, still us sinners, He's looking at us through the perfect work of Jesus. And God's accepting us because of Jesus.

That's the wonder of it. But it also tells us that He suffered once for sins. Once. There's no more need of sacrifice.

All the Old Testament sacrifices that were repeated day after day after day were all pointing to the once and for all sacrifice that Jesus would make.

And when Jesus said on the cross, it is finished. He meant what He said. Because it was finished.

[13:25] That's why the curtain in the temple was torn. And for the first time, people were able to see right into the most holy place. Because there was now immediate access to God the Father.

No need anymore to come through any animal sacrifice. Jesus Christ was the supreme sacrifice. He says, I've done it all. The way is open.

It's finished. No more sacrifice needed. And so this is the wonderful thing that we have here. Our debt has been paid in full.

It's finished. And His rising from the dead is the ultimate proof of it being finished. He was raised for our justification.

This is it. He died and He was raised. And so today, He is seated at the right hand of God. Then in verse 19, it goes on to say, In which He went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison because they formerly did not obey.

[14:34] And so on. And there's a lot of different views given on this. And there are some people who actually think that Christ descended into hell and preached to those in hell.

To those who are in prison. Those who died Christless. That Jesus actually has gone down into hell and that He has preached to them. And there's almost the idea of a second opportunity.

But the Bible doesn't give us anything to indicate that. And I think it's very, well, my own take on it is, I think the context makes it all very kind of straightforward as far as I'm concerned.

And it simply means there, when it talks there of verse 19, in which He went, this is, we're talking of Christ. In which He went to proclaim to the spirits in prison because they formerly did not obey when God's patience waited in the days of Noah while the ark was being prepared.

And so on. And just as the Spirit of Christ, just as the Holy Spirit communicating Christ in the Old Testament.

[15:45] Now we've got to remember, because I believe this is key to what is being said here. Because Christ was revealed and spoken about and preached about and prophesied about in the Old Testament.

Chapter 1, remember, as we were looking at it in verse 10. Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be used searched and inquired carefully.

Inquiring what personal time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating. When he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories.

So way back in the Old Testament, we find that amongst the prophets is the Spirit of Christ. And the Spirit of Christ was being preached. Christ was being preached by the prophets. Christ was being preached by the prophets.

[17:03] Of course, after Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came in greater power, a greater manifestation. Because we are living, as it were, in the day of the Spirit. But the Spirit was still functioning in the Old Testament.

And we've got to remember that believers, sometimes people say, How were people saved in the Old Testament? Exactly in the same way as they're saved in the New.

By trusting in God's provision of His Son. In the Old Testament, they were looking to the Messiah who was to come.

And they were trusting in Him for salvation. And the Holy Spirit was applying that work to their soul. We, in turn, look back to the Christ who has come.

And we trust in Him. It's the same Savior, the same Messiah, the same Christ, that the Old Testament and the New Testament church believed in.

[18:03] So, I believe, very simply, that it is talking here about Noah, who is preaching. Preaching, and as he was preaching there to all these people, who did not obey when God's patience waited in the days of Noah.

That was some patience. A hundred and twenty years God was patient with them. Day after day, they heard Noah. Because it wasn't, Noah didn't just build the ark.

He reasoned with people. He spoke to them. He no doubt pleaded with them. Because, as it says, he was a preacher of righteousness. But they did not listen.

They mocked Noah. They laughed at him. They thought he was losing his mind, no doubt, building this great ark. And yet, in all these years, they refused to listen to God.

And now, they are, these are the ones who are in prison. The spirits that are in prison. All those from that Old Testament era. Who heard of the gospel.

[19:14] Who heard of the Messiah. Who heard the way of salvation. Who heard of coming judgment. And yet, refused in any way to listen or to obey the voice of Christ.

That was spoken through the mouth of Noah. And that is, I believe, very simply, what is being said there. And, in many ways, it was an encouragement.

Peter, I believe, is using this very analogy. Because the Christian church, remember, is in its infancy. Although it's a growing church, it is still small in number.

And it's surrounded, the church is surrounded by so many people who do not believe. There were only eight saved in the ark.

And Peter is saying, right from the very dawn of history, it's been like this. Noah suffered. It was tough for Noah. Standing on your own in a godless generation.

[20:15] Proclaiming the truth. And nobody listening to you. And, no doubt, everybody laughing at you. But Noah remained faithful. He kept going despite everything.

And he's saying, the church has always suffered. It's always been the same. But, you know, the judgment eventually came. And judgment will always come.

God is patient. And he's exercising that patience continually. And, you know, you and I know that if God weren't patient, we would have been consumed long ago.

Because, remember, he's a consuming fire. And if we could understand the nature of sin and the holiness of God, we would realize that we are actually, it's extraordinary that we are continuing to exist.

Were God to come. Were God to, as it were, bypass and overrule his mercy and his grace and his love. And were simply to display his wrath and his justice and his judgment.

[21:17] Who could stand? But let us thank the Lord that his mercy are new every morning. Great is his faithfulness. And so, we see here that Noah continued, continued with his witness all throughout these years.

And then Peter, as he moves on, he talks, then he begins to think through the flood and through the water and all these things. And he then brings to the theme of baptism.

And he says, baptism, which now saves sin. But Peter says, not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience.

So, Peter's making the point clear that baptism doesn't actually save a person in the real sense.

Baptism, I suppose, we could say is an outward expression of a spiritual inward appeal for God's

cleansing.

Now, I know, we know and we can say that baptism is an act of faith. And I know that there are differing views regarding baptism in the Christian church.

[22 : 29] And Christians hold to hold a difference. Some Christians hold very strongly to adults only being baptized. And other Christians hold very strongly to full immersion with regard to baptism.

Some Christians hold very strongly to the fact that it's only people who have come to know Jesus Christ as Savior that should be baptized. And there are others who hold that baptism is given to those and given to the children of those who believe.

Now, in our own, I suppose, in our own tradition here, we use that word believe in a very, probably in a wider sense maybe than some do.

And what we are saying is that those who believe, that is, those within the visible church who actually, they believe the word of God to be true.

They believe that Jesus Christ is the only Savior of sinners. They believe all this truth fully with their heart, even although they may not have come to a full, actual, saving knowledge of that.

[23 : 50] And certainly in here, that has tended to be the way that we have looked on it, following on the sign of the covenant from the Old Testament of circumcision through to the New Testament of baptism.

Now, again, I know that it's an area of great debate within the Christian church, and people hold strongly to differing views like that. But what we're saying, again, when you look at the ark, Noah was saved and his wife and the family.

The family were brought in. God has always had a place for the family. God has always had a place for the family.

God has always had a place for the family.

God has always had a place for the family. However, before a person stands there, they have to be absolutely persuaded of what they're doing, and that they really want salvation for their child.

[25 : 39] Baptism doesn't save, but it is pointing to, ultimately, what we would say the greatest baptism of all is for the baptism of God's Spirit, where God's Spirit will come in and upon a person, saving them, bringing them into faith in Jesus Christ.

So that's really what you're saying when you want your child baptized. You say, this is what I want for my child. I promise to bring up my child in the church, in the way of the Lord. And I want for my child that this child will be saved.

And you're praying for that child, and you seek to bring them up within the church. But then Peter moves on, and he then tells us, Since, therefore, Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, and so on.

We need here, really, what Peter is saying is, See how Jesus had to suffer because of sin. Then it's time for you, he says, to take action against sin.

We'll just look at this for two minutes. Peter is really saying, Our goal in life should be to cease from sin.

[27 : 01] To stop sinning. Now, of course, you and I know that we can't stop sinning in this world. We'll never be perfect till we get to glory. But that doesn't mean that we aren't to wage war against sin.

And that's what Peter is saying. Look, he says. Basically, he's saying it's high time to stop living the way you used to live. This is the whole goal of your life.

Now, suffering in and of itself will not make a person stop sinning. But it's this suffering with Christ. Because Christ, in an amazing way, this identification with Christ, and often the suffering that we do go through as a believer, helps us in our battle against sin.

And in verse 2, he's saying, You don't need to live the rest of your life in the old way. In the old days, you were always giving in. It wasn't an issue.

You just gave in. All the time you gave in, you give in, you give in. You don't need to give in anymore. That's what it's saying. So as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh, no longer for human passion, but for the will of God.

[28 : 16] So that's really what Peter's saying. He says, you've spent long enough just living any old way. You've lived long enough like that.

Don't live like the unbeliever anymore. You've got to live like Christ. You've got to battle with sin.

That's really, if we were to sum up what is being said there in that first section. Remember this, that God doesn't save us to live any old way we choose.

He saves us in order to resemble his son, Jesus Christ. And as we, the more we resemble Jesus in this world, the more effective our witness will be.

We've got to remember that sometimes people think witness is all about what we say. Our greatest witness is about what we do, what we are. If you are like Christ, that, my friend, is the most powerful witness of all.

[29 : 24] That is what will mark you out. That's what will touch people's hearts. That is what will make people think. Seek then to be like Jesus, to live like Jesus, to follow Jesus, and to have Jesus as your Lord and Savior.

Let's pray. Oh, Lord our God, we pray to help us as we go forward. Help us to follow the Lord with all our heart.

We give thanks for all the way that thou art working with us and how patient, how patient you are with us when we think of how stubborn we often are and how prone we are to sin.

We pray, Lord, to be with us day by day and to encourage us as we go forward. Deliver us from evil. Help us to follow thee with all our heart. Do us good and take us all to our home safely.

Forgive us our sins. In Jesus' name we ask it. Amen.