

Three Opinions “Spirits In Prison”

by **David Lee Burris**



*“He went & made
proclamation to the spirits
now in prison”*

1 Peter 3:19-20

*Spirits
in
prison?*



1 Peter 3:18-20

NKJV: ¹⁸For 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**, ¹⁹**by whom** also He went and **preached** to the **spirits in prison**, ²⁰who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah....

NASB: ¹⁸For Christ also **died** for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive **in** the **spirit**; ¹⁹**in which** also He went and **made proclamation** to the **spirits now in prison**, ²⁰who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah....

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JESUS WENT TO THE SOULS IN PRISON



I PETER 3:18-20

“For **Christ** also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: *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.”

BIBLICAL ESSAYS;
OR,
Exegetical Studies
ON
THE BOOKS OF JOB AND JONAH, EZEKIEL'S PROPHECY OF GOG
AND MAGOG, ST. PETER'S "SPIRITS IN PRISON," AND
THE KEY TO THE APOCALYPSE.

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evidence whatever to show that the Church ever generally believed that Christ preached in Hades to the heathen or to the antediluvians. The Church, no doubt, held the doctrine of Christ's descent into Hades, and freely expressed its belief that His entrance into the spirit-world was an event fraught with blessing for the saints of the old dispensation, and that it was the means of their removal from a place of comparative discomfort and gloom into the blissful fields of Paradise. No stream can rise higher than its fountain, and the opinions of the later Fathers on the subject are all distinctly derived from their interpretation of 1 Pet. iii. 19. There is not the slightest evidence that there was any "tradition" on the subject current in early days, that is, any tradition which was not entirely dependent on the expressions used by S. Peter in that single verse.

On the other hand, it is clear that S. Peter in that text propounds no new revelation which had been made to him by the Holy Spirit, but simply refers to facts well known to all those whom he addressed. Inasmuch, therefore, as there is no evidence that any Christian writer, prior to Clement of Alexandria, believed in Christ having preached in the intermediate state to sinners who had been previously impenitent, and since the sentiments expressed by Clement and the later Fathers are avowedly based on speculations deduced from that text, and from that text only, it is highly probable that a closer examination of that text

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iniquity, such as the antediluvians in the age of Noah. The "summary" simply lays emphasis upon the fact noticed in Matt. xxvii. 52, 53, that at our Lord's resurrection and prior to His ascension, Christ "raised up many with Him and brought them to His Father."

There is no dispute whatever as to the doctrine of "the Descent into Hades" having formed part and parcel of the general creed of the Churches of the East in the middle of the third century. But no Christian writer of that period, save Clement of Alexandria, seems to have dreamed of salvation having been offered by Christ to any persons cut off in a state of alienation from God. The silence of the Fathers on this subject cannot have been accidental.

In order, however, further to illustrate the point, Dean Plumtre has recourse to the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus. He quotes with approbation Tischendorf's opinion that this curious compilation of legends is "derived or copied from a very ancient apocryphal Gospel of the second century."¹ The Dean, therefore, argues that "the antiquity of the

¹ "Sermonem si spectas, mea quidem sententia nihil est quod originem actis Pilati aut Jacobi evangelio posteriorem probet. Idearum vero ratio ea est ut grecum certe textum examinanti, non varie interpolatum latinum, nulla homini ab aetate apostolica proximo aliena inveniatur. . . . Ex ipso vero libello nostro, qui tum nondum cum actis Pilati conjunctus esse videtur, prae aliis multis hausit, nulla quidem alieni mentione facta, Eusebius Alexandrinus. . . . Quae omnia conjuncta ejusmodi sunt ut libellum nostrum ex antiquissimo scripto apocrypho secundi saeculi haustum vel transcriptum existimem."—*Evangelia Apocrypha*, edid. Constantinus Tischendorf (Lips. 1853), Prolegomena, pp. lxxvii–lxxviii.

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the statement of S. Peter. The apostle does not say that Christ after His resurrection went and preached to the spirits in prison, but that Christ "in the spirit," i.e. Christ as pneuma or spirit, went and preached to the individuals whose disobedience is recounted in ver. 20. According to our view of the passage, the apostle, after mentioning the fact that Christ, though put to death in the flesh, was quickened or kept alive in the spirit, was led on to adduce, as another instance of His long-suffering patience with ungodly sinners, Christ's action "in the spirit," not indeed Christ's work in His disembodied state in the interval which elapsed between His death and resurrection, but Christ's work at a previous period afterwards fully described (ver. 20), when "in the spirit," prior to His incarnation, Christ as the Pre-incarnate Word (the *λόγος ἄσαρκος*), preached to the antediluvian race, "the world of the ungodly" (2 Pet. ii. 5).

It would, indeed, be soaring into a region of speculation, where we have no guide to direct us, to maintain that the pneuma which Christ had in His disembodied state was identical in all respects with the pneuma which He, as "the Angel of Jehovah's presence," possessed prior to the incarnation. We are not forgetful of the fact that in His disembodied state the Redeemer had not only pneuma (spirit), but also the "reasonable soul," spoken of in the Athanasian Creed. Though we emphasize the statement of man's tripartite nature,

The disobedience of "the spirits in prison" consisted in their refusal to listen to the warning afforded to them, which warning was continued for the space of upwards of a hundred years. This was the instance of the long-suffering patience of Christ which the apostle desired to deeply impress on the attention of his readers. For if Christ as the Pre-incarnate Word endured "with much long-suffering" such "gainsaying of sinners against themselves" (or "against Himself"), His people ought not to wax weary or faint in their souls (Heb. x. 3), even though, like their Master, they should be called to stretch out their hands all the day long unto a disobedient and gainsaying people (Rom. x. 21).

The passage, however, does not speak of the Spirit of Christ preaching through Noah, as Augustine and others after him imagined, although Noah is in another passage styled "a preacher of righteousness" (2 Pet. ii. 5). Nor are the words of the apostle explained by reference to Gen. vi. 3, as if an allusion was made in the text to the saying of Jehovah there recorded: "My spirit shall not strive with man for ever." For the term "spirit" in Genesis is not to be

its centre in the *soul*, and Christ's incarnation probably consisted in the Pre-incarnate Word taking to itself a human body and soul of the substance of the Virgin Mary, to which the pre-existing *pneuma*, which had manifested itself to angels, was united. We do not, however, desire to rest our interpretation of 1 Pet. iii. 19 on any uncertain basis of psychology. But see Delitzsch's *Biblical Psychology*, English translation, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh 1867, and Heard's *Tripartite Nature of Man: Spirit, Soul and Body*, 5th ed., T. & T. Clark, 1882.

the same word and form in ver. 22, in the phrase "having gone into heaven" (*προεβηθεις εις ουρανόν*)—though the identity of the expression cannot without harshness be retained in English,¹ shows that the apostle mentally contrasts the two events, the going "up" into heaven, and the going "down" to earth. For the descent referred to signifies necessarily no more than that mentioned in Gen. xi. 5, 7, where Jehovah is represented as "going down" to confound the builders of the tower of Babylon. The expression "went" would be employed with equal propriety, whether used of Christ's going down from heaven in order to preach to the antediluvians on earth, or of Christ going down after death to the place of departed spirits.

The meaning of the term "prison" has been already discussed (see p. 166 ff.). But the question is, what idea is conveyed by the phrase "the spirits in prison"? Does it signify "the spirits *who are* in prison," *i.e.* who in consequence of their sin were "cast into prison," and therefore were regarded by the apostle as still there? The preaching in that case must necessarily be thought of as having taken place previous to their imprisonment. Or does the phrase signify "the spirits *who were* in prison," the apostle leaving his readers mentally to draw the inference, that possibly all, or at least considerable numbers of the transgressors, were by means of the preaching of

¹ The literal translation would be: "in which, also, having gone to the spirits in prison, He preached."

the gospel¹ released out of their prison? But even if "the spirits in prison" be understood to signify "the spirits *who were* in prison," the release of these spirits out of prison is by no means distinctly stated.

The awful character of the transgressions committed prior to the Flood, and the universality of the apostasy which then took place, is spoken of in the strongest manner in the Book of Genesis. The story is several times referred to in the New Testament,² and the deliverance of Noah and his family is generally referred to along with the punishment of the ungodly. The outlines of the entire narrative are distinctly set forth in the context of the passage in S. Peter (ver. 20). But, if the apostle was speaking of Christ's preaching in the Under-world, it is remarkable that he should say nothing definite about the outcome of that preaching, especially as he refers to "the spirits" of those who perished in the Flood as "in prison." It will scarcely be maintained that the long-continued impenitence and hardness of heart

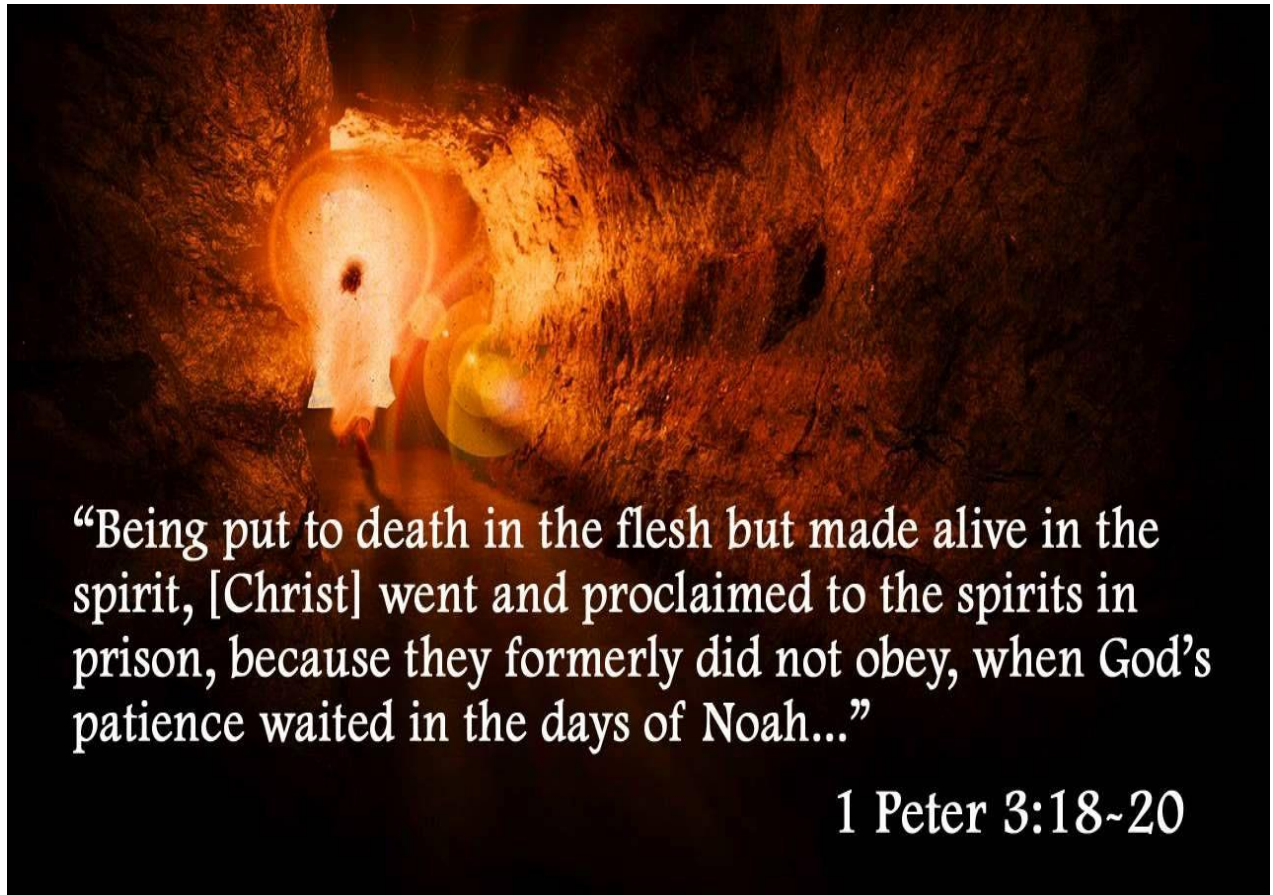
¹ The word *κηρυσσειν* in the New Testament generally conveys the idea of the preaching of good tidings. It signifies, as von Zeeschwitz notes, properly the preaching of the kingdom of God, and hence is used, as in the case of the preaching of our Lord and of John the Baptist, of a preaching in which warnings of judgment and offers of grace were commingled. It is never, however, used of a simple announcement of wrath, though used, on the other hand, to denote a preaching in which mercy only was the theme. See *Petri Apostoli de Christi ad inferos descensu sententia ex loco nobilissimo* 1 Ep. iii. 19 *eruta exacta ad Epistolae argumentum*. Scripsit C. A. G. von Zeeschwitz. Lipsiæ: Doerfling et Francke, 1857.

² As in Matt. xxiv. 37-39; Luke xvii. 26, 27; Heb. xi. 7; 2 Pet. ii. 5, iii. 6; Jude 13-15, and in the passage before us.

why the gospel should have been specially preached to them. No mention is made of an offer of salvation having been similarly made to others. Were the antediluvians the only "spirits in prison" in the Unseen-world? Are we to believe that there are "many prisons" in the Under-world corresponding to the "many mansions" in the Father's house? The assertion that the preaching of Christ to the antediluvians is only mentioned "as a sample of a like precious work on others," is the last resort of an exegesis driven to despair. Not a tittle of evidence can be adduced to justify such an assertion. But assertions of such a kind are often made with the greater boldness, the smaller the basis really is on which to construct an argument.

The persons to whom Christ preached are described as "the spirits in prison which aforesaid were disobedient." If the clause "the spirits in prison" be regarded as the principal, and that which in the Revised Version is the relative clause be the subordinate, the phrase may be interpreted to mean: "The prisoners who were in prison who aforesaid had been disobedient in the days of Noah."¹ In that case the reference of the passage

¹ Τῶς ἐν φυλακῇ ἀνίστασιν . . . ἀπειθήσαν. The article *τοῖς* in such a case would have been naturally expected before the participle. In that case the disobedience in former days would be contrasted with an implied submission in later time. The second dative (the participle) must then be regarded as the less important part of the clause, serving more exactly to define those signified by "the spirits in prison" in the preceding part.



“Being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, [Christ] went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah...”

1 Peter 3:18-20



So far from being a "superficial" interpretation, this is in reality the true explanation of the passage. It brings the whole into close connection with the immediate context. It justifies the use of the connective particle "also" (*καί*) in the 19th verse, which unquestionably suggests that the illustration thereby joined to the preceding is akin to what had been already mentioned.

The passage thus understood contains several distinct statements. In the first the apostle affirms that the spirits of whom he speaks were "in prison." Secondly, he states that their imprisonment was caused by their former obstinate disobedience. He next mentions the long-suffering of God, which it was his main object to illustrate by the reference to the history of the antediluvian world. The disobedience of the "spirits in prison" took place in former days; "aforetime" (*πότε*), "when (*ότε*) the long-suffering of God waited in the days of Noah." The apostle speaks of those transgressors as "kept under punishment unto the day of judgment" (2 Pet. ii. 9),¹ *i.e.* as "spirits in prison." But he does not enter into any details as to what that punishment consisted in. He hurries onward to speak of their disobedience during life, and to compare the deliverance offered to believers in Christ by true

¹ It is well to note the important variation in translation in the Revised Version, as quoted above, from that of the Authorized Version, which renders that passage, "to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished." We cannot here discuss the correctness of the alteration.

entrance by baptism into "the ark of Christ's Church," with the salvation which had been once offered in the ark of Noah to the antediluvian world. Christ, as the Pre-incarnate Logos, was the cause of the latter deliverance, and hence the reference by the apostle to the mercy and long-suffering of the Son of God in former days was no real digression from his argument; while the allusion to the fate of "the spirits in prison" was a wholesome warning to those to whom the Epistle was addressed, lest they should "fall after the same example of disobedience" (Heb. iv. 11).

At the close of our argument it is necessary also to notice the passage in iv. 1-6. For as mention is there made of the gospel having been preached to the dead, it is of importance to consider that statement in the context in which it is contained. The whole paragraph runs thus:—

"Forasmuch then as Christ suffered in the flesh, arm ye yourselves also with the same mind; for he that hath suffered in the flesh hath ceased from sin; that ye no longer should live the rest of your time in the flesh to the lusts of men, but to the will of God. For the time past may suffice to have wrought the desire of the Gentiles, and to have walked in lasciviousness, lusts, wine-bibbings, revellings, carousings, and abominable idolatries: wherein they think it strange that ye run not with them into the same excess of riot, speaking evil of you: who shall give account to Him that is ready to judge the quick and

ON
CHRIST'S DESCENT INTO HELL,
AND
THE INTERMEDIATE STATE.
A
SERMON
ON
1 PETER 3:18, 19, 20
BY SAMUEL LORD BISHOP OF ST. ASAPH.

1 PETER, 3:18, 19, 20

—Being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: By which also he went and preached unto the Spirits in Prison, Which sometime were disobedient, when once the long-suffering of God waited, in the days of Noah.—

In the first rudiments of our Christian Faith, comprised in the Apostles' Creed, which we are made to get by heart in our earliest infancy, we are taught to believe that "our Lord Jesus Christ descended into Hell:" and this belief is solemnly professed, by every member of the congregation, when that creed is repeated in the daily service of the church. And it seemed of so much importance, that it should be distinctly acknowledged by the Church of England, when we separated from the Roman communion; that our Reformers thought proper to make it by itself the subject of one of the Articles of Religion. They were aware, that upon the fact of our Lord's descent into hell, the church of Rome pretended to build her doctrine of purgatory; which they justly esteemed one of her worst corruptions. But, apprehensive that the zeal of reformation might, in this as in some other instances, carry men too far, and induce them to reject a most important truth, on which a dangerous error had been once ingrafted; to prevent this intemperance of reform, they assert in the 3d article of the 39, "That as Christ died for us and was buried, so it is to be believed, "that he went down into Hell."

The terms, in which they state the proposition, imply, that Christ's going down into Hell is a matter of no less importance, to be believed, than that he died upon the cross for men; is no less a plain matter of fact, in the history of our Lord's life and death, than the burial of his dead body. It should seem, that what is thus taught, among the first things which children learn, should be among the plainest. That what is thus laid down, as a matter of the same necessity to be believed as our Lord's passion and atonement, should be among the least disputed. That what every christian is required to acknowledge, as his own belief, in the daily assemblies of the faithful, should little need either explanation or proof, to any that have been instructed in the very first principles only of the doctrine of Christ. But so it is, that what the sagacity of our reformers foresaw, the precaution, which they used, has not prevented. The truth itself has been brought into discredit by the errors, with which it has been adulterated. And such has been the industry of modern refinement, and unfortunately so great has been its success; that doubts have been raised about the sense of this plain article of our creed by some, and by others about the truth and authenticity of it. It will therefore be no unprofitable undertaking, to shew, that the assertion in the Apostles' creed, that "our Lord descended into Hell," is to be taken as a plain matter of fact in the literal meaning of the words—to shew, what proof of this fact we have in holy writ—and lastly to shew, the great use and importance of the fact, as a point of christian doctrine.

First, then, for the sense of the proposition, "He descended into Hell," if we consider the words as they stand in the creed itself, and in connection with what immediately precedes and follows them; they appear evidently to contain a declaration of something, which our Lord performed, some going of our Lord to a place called "Hell," in the interval of time between the burial of his dead body, and his rising to life again on the third day after that interment. For thus speaks the creed of Jesus Christ. "Was crucified, dead, and buried, He "descended into Hell, the third day he rose again from the Dead." It is evident, that the descending into hell is spoken of as an action of our Lord; but as an action performed by him, after he was dead and buried, and before he rose again. In the body our dead Lord, more than any other dead man, could perform no action; for the very notion of death is, that all sensation, and activity, and power of motion of the body, is, in that state of the man, extinguished. This therefore was an act of that part of the man, which continues active after death; that is of the soul separated by death from the body; as the interment must be understood of the body apart from the soul. The dead body could no more go into hell, than the living soul could be laid in the grave. Considering the words therefore, as they stand in the creed as the church now receives it, they seem as little capable of any variety of meaning, and almost as little to require explanation, as the word "buried." That word describes not more plainly, to the apprehensions of all men, what was done with the inanimate body of our crucified Lord; than **these words declare what was done by his rational soul, in its intermediate state.**

The only question, that can possibly arise to a plain man's understanding, is, Where or What the place may be, which is here called Hell, to which, it is said, our Lord, in the state of death, descended? It is evident, that this must be some place below the surface of the earth. For it is said that he "descended," that is, he went down to it. Our Lord's death took place upon the surface of the earth, where the human race inhabit. That therefore, and none higher, is the place from which he descended: of consequence the place, to which he went by descent, was below it.

And it is with relation to these parts below the surface, that his rising to life, on the third day, must be understood. This was only a return from the nether regions to the realms of life and day, from which he had descended: not his ascension into Heaven, which was a subsequent event, and makes a distinct article in the Creed.

But although the Hell, to which our Lord descended, was indeed below, as the word descent implies; it is by no means to be understood of the place of Torment. This is a point which requires elucidation, to prevent a mistake into which the unlearned easily might fall. The word "Hell" is so often applied in common speech, and in the English translation of the New Testament, to the place of torment, that the genuine meaning of the word, in which however it is used in many passages of the English Bible, is almost forgotten; and the common people never hear of Hell, but their thoughts are carried to that dismal place, "where the fallen angels are kept in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day." **But the word, in its natural import, signifies only that invisible place, which is the appointed habitation of departed souls, in the interval between death and the general resurrection.**

That such a place must be, is indisputable. For when man dieth, his soul dieth not; but returneth unto him that gave it, to be disposed of at his will and pleasure; which is clearly implied in that admonition of our Savior, "Fear not them which kill the body, but cannot kill the soul." But the soul, existing after death and separated from the body, though of a nature immaterial, must be in some place. For however metaphysicians may talk of place, as one of the adjuncts of body, as if nothing but gross sensible body could be limited to a place; to exist without relation to place, seems to be one of the incommunicable perfections of the Divine Being; and it is hardly to be conceived, that any created spirit, of however high an order, can be without locality: or without such determination of its existence at any given time to some certain place, that it shall be true to say of it, "Here it is, and not elsewhere." That such at least is the condition of the human soul, were it seasonable to go into so abstruse a disquisition, might be proved, I think, indisputably from Holy Writ. Assuming therefore that every departed soul has its place of residence, it would be reasonable to suppose, if revelation were silent on the subject, that a common mansion is provided for them all, their nature being similar; since we see, throughout all nature, creatures of the same sort placed together in the same element. But revelation is not silent. The sacred writers of the Old Testament speak of such a common mansion in the inner parts of the earth: and we find the same opinion so general among the heathen writers of antiquity; that it is more probable, that it had its rise in the earliest patriarchal revelations, than in the imaginations of man, or in poetical fiction. The notion is confirmed by the language of the writers of the New Testament; with this additional circumstance, that they divide this central mansion of the dead into two distinct regions, for the separate lodging of the souls of the righteous and the reprobate. In this too they have the concurrence of the earliest heathen poets; who placed the good and the bad in separate divisions of the central region. The name which the Hebrew writers gave to this mansion of departed souls (without regard to any such division) expresses only that it is a place unknown, about which all are curious and inquisitive. The writers of the New Testament adopted the name, which the earliest Greek writers had given it, which describes it by the single property of invisibility. But for the place of torment by itself they had quite another appellation.

The English word “hell,” in its primary and natural meaning, signifies nothing more than “the unseen and covered place;” and is properly used, both in the Old and the New Testament, to render the Hebrew word in the one, and the Greek word in the other, which denote the invisible mansion of disembodied souls, without any reference to suffering. But being used also in the translation of the New Testament for that other word, which properly denotes the place of torment; the good sense of the word, if we may so call it, is unfortunately forgotten, and the common people know of no other hell but that of the burning lake.

This certainly was *not* the hell to which the soul of Christ descended. He descended to hell properly so called, to the invisible mansion of departed spirits, and to that part of it, where the souls of the faithful, when they are delivered from the burthen of the flesh, are in joy and felicity. That he should go to this place was a necessary branch of the general scheme and project of redemption; which required, that the Divine Word should take our nature upon him, and fulfil the entire condition of humanity, in every period and stage of man’s existence; from the commencement of life, in the mother’s womb, to the extinction and the renovation of it. The same wonderful scheme of humiliation, which required that the Son should be conceived, and born, and put to death; made it equally necessary, that his soul, in its intermediate state, should be gathered to the souls of the departed saints.

That the invisible place of their residence is the Hell, to which our Lord descended, is evident from the terms of his own promise to the repentant thief upon the cross: **“Verily I say unto thee, to day shalt thou be with me in “paradise.” Paradise was certainly some place, where our Lord was to be on the very day, on which he suffered; and where the companion of his sufferings was to be with him.** It was not Heaven—for to Heaven our Lord after his death ascended not, till after his resurrection; as appears from his own words to Mary Magdalen. He was not therefore in heaven on the day of the crucifixion; and where *be* was not, the thief could not be with him. **It was no place of torment; for to any such place the name of paradise never was applied.** It could be no other, than that region of repose and rest, where the souls of the righteous abide in joyful hope of the consummation of their bliss. And upon this single text we might safely rest the proof of this article of our Creed, in the sense in which we explain it; a sense so plain and prominent in the bare words, to everyone who is not misled by the popular misapplication of the word Hell; that it never would have been set aside, to make room for expositions of more refinement, much less would the authenticity of the article ever even have been questioned, but for the countenance which it was supposed to give to the doctrine of purgatory, as taught in the Church of Rome; with which however it has not even a remote connection. Time will not permit me to enter into a particular examination of the different interpretations of this article, which have been attempted by those, who have not gone the length of proposing to expunge it from the Creed; because they were well aware, that although it is not to be found in any copy of the Creed, now extant, of an earlier date than the latter end of the fourth century; **yet that Christ, in some sense or other, descended into Hell, was the unanimous belief of the Christian Church from the earliest ages.**

Unless we would admit the extravagant assertion, as to me it seems, of the venerable Calvin, that our blessed Lord actually went down to the place of torment, and there sustained, horrible to think or mention, the pains of a reprobate soul in punishment. A notion evidently confuted by our Lord's own description of the place, where the companion of his sufferings on the cross was to be with him, on the very day of the crucifixion. This sense being thus confuted, I say the personal descent of our Lord to that region, where the souls of the righteous rest in hope, is the only literal interpretation, which the words of the article will bear; and that any figurative interpretation of the words of a Creed, or formulary of faith, are inadmissible.

This proof rests, I think, principally upon three texts of scripture, in addition to that which I have already mentioned, as affording by itself ample confirmation of the truth of the proposition; namely, our Lord's promise to the penitent thief upon the cross. But there are three other texts, which conspire with this to put the matter out of doubt. The first is that text of the Psalmist, which was alledged by St. Peter in his first sermon on the day of Pentecost, as a prophecy concerning Christ, verified in his resurrection from the dead, "Thou wilt not leave my soul in hell, neither wilt thou suffer thy Holy One to see corruption." The apostle having recited these words of the Psalmist, says, they were not spoken by David of himself, but that David, being a prophet, spake of the resurrection of Christ, that *his* soul was not left in hell, neither did *his* flesh see corruption. From this text, if there were no other, the article, in the sense in which we have explained it, is clearly and infallibly deduced. For if the soul of Christ were not left in hell *at* his resurrection; then, it *was* in hell *before* his resurrection. But it was not there either before his death, or after his resurrection; for that never was imagined. Therefore, it descended into hell after his death, and before his resurrection. For as his flesh, by virtue of the Divine promise, saw no corruption, although it was in the grave, the place of corruption, where it remained until his resurrection; so his soul, which, by virtue of the like promise, was not left in hell, was *in* that hell, where it was not *left*, until the time came for its re-union to the body for the accomplishment of the resurrection. Hence it is so clearly evinced, that the soul of Christ was in the place called hell, "that none but an infidel," faith St. Augustine, "can deny it."

A third scripture, which goes to the proof of the same fact, is, that very remarkable passage in the third chapter of St. Peter's first epistle, which I have chosen for my text. I might mention as a fourth, another passage in the following chapter of the same epistle, which alludes to the same event; but not, I think, with equal certainty: for the sense of that following passage is indeed dependant upon this; insomuch that any figurative interpretation, which would invalidate the argument we shall deduce from this first passage, would in equal degree affect the second: and no proof can be drawn from that of Christ's descent into Hell, if none can be previously found in the words of my text.

But in them, taken in their most literal and obvious meaning, we find not only a distinct assertion of the fact, that "Christ descended into Hell" in his disembodied spirit, but moreover a declaration of the business, upon which he went thither; or in which, at least, his soul was employed while it was there: "being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit." "By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison, which sometime were disobedient." The interpretation of this whole passage turns upon the expression "Spirits in prison;" the sense of which I shall first, therefore, endeavour to ascertain, as the key to the meaning of the whole.

It is hardly necessary to mention, that "Spirits" here can signify no other spirits than the souls of men. For we read not of any preaching of Christ to any other race of beings than mankind. The apostle's assertion, therefore, is this; that Christ "went and preached to souls of men in prison." The invisible mansion of departed spirits, though certainly not a place of penal confinement to the good, is nevertheless, in some respects, a prison. It is a place of seclusion from the external world; a place of unfinished happiness, consisting in rest, security, and hope, more than enjoyment. It is a place, which the souls of men never would have entered, had not sin introduced death; and from which there is no exit by any natural means, for those who once have entered. The deliverance of the Saints from it is to be effected by our Lord's power. It is described in the old Latin language, as a place enclosed within an impassable sense; and, in the poetical parts of scripture, it is represented as secured by gates of brass, which our Lord is to batter down; and barricadoed with huge massive iron bars, which he is to cut in sunder. As a place of consinement, therefore, though not of punishment, it may well be called a prison. The original word, however, in this text of the apostle, imports not of necessity so much as this; but merely a place of safe-keeping: for so **this passage might be rendered with great exactness. "He went and preached to the spirits in safe-keeping."** And the invisible mansion of departed souls is to the righteous a place of safe-keeping, where they are preserved under the shadow of God's right hand, as their condition sometimes is described in scripture, till the season shall arrive for their advancement to their future glory; as the souls of the wicked, on the other hand, are reserved, in the other division of the same place, unto the judgement of the great day. Now if Christ went and preached to souls of men thus in prison, or in safe-keeping; surely, he went to the prison of those souls, or to the place of their custody. And what place that should be, but the Hell of the Apostles' Creed to which our Lord descended, I have not yet met with the critic that could explain. So clearly does this text affirm the fact of Christ's descent into Hell.

But this is not all: it agrees with the Apostle's Creed in the time of this event; that it was in the interval between our Lord's death and resurrection... For the apostle affirms, that it was in his spirit, *i.e.* in his disembodied soul, that Christ went and preached to those souls in safe custody. If the word "flesh" denote, as it most evidently does, the part in which death took effect upon him; "spirit" must, denote the part in which life was preserved in him, *i.e.* his own soul. And the word "quicken" is often applied to signify, not the resuscitation of life extinguished, but the preservation and continuance of life subsisting. The exact rendering, therefore, of the apostle's words would be, "being put to death in the flesh, but quick in the spirit;" *i.e.* surviving in his soul the stroke of death, which his body had sustained, "by which," rather in "which," that is, in which surviving soul, he went and preached to the souls of men in prison, or in safe-keeping.

Those, in later times, who have improved upon the hint of figurating this passage, have succeeded no better than they, who have made the like attempt upon the article of our Lord's descent in the Creed. They tell us, that, by the souls in prison, are to be understood the gentile world in bondage and captivity to sin and satan, and held in the chains of their own lusts. And for confirmation of this, they refer to those passages of the prophet Isaiah in which it is predicted of Christ, "that he is to bring the prisoners out of prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house—That he is to say to the prisoners, go forth—That he is to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those that are bound."

The souls in custody, to whom our Savior went, in his disembodied soul, and preached, were those “which sometime were disobedient.” The expression “sometime were,” or “one while had been” disobedient, implies that they were recovered however from that disobedience, and before their death had been brought to repentance and saith in the Redeemer to come. To such souls he went and preached. But what did he preach to departed souls, and what could be the end of his preaching? Certainly, he preached neither repentance nor faith; for the preaching of either comes too late to the departed soul. These souls had believed and repented, or they had not been in that part of the nether regions, which the soul of the Redeemer visited. Nor was the end of his preaching any liberation of them from we know not what purgatorial pains, of which the Scriptures give not the slightest intimation. But if he went to proclaim to them (and to proclaim or publish is the true sense of the word, to preach) the glad tidings, that he had actually offered the sacrifice of their redemption, and was about to appear before the Father as their intercessor, in the merit of his own blood; this was a preaching fit to be addressed to departed souls, and would give new animation and assurance to their hope of the consummation, in due season, of their bliss; and this, it may be presumed, was the end of his preaching.

But the great difficulty in the description of the souls, to whom this preaching for this purpose was addressed, is this; that they were souls of some of the antediluvian race. Not that it at all startles me, to find antediluvian souls in safe-keeping for final salvation. On the contrary, I should find it very difficult to believe (unless I were to read it somewhere in the Bible), that of the millions that perished in the general deluge, all died hardened in impenitence and unbelief; insomuch that not one of that race could be an object of future mercy, beside the eight persons who were miraculously saved in the ark, for the purpose of repopling the depopulated earth. Nothing in the general plan of God’s dealings with mankind, as revealed in Scripture, makes it necessary to suppose, that, of the antediluvian race, who might repent upon Noah’s preaching, more would be saved from the temporal judgement, than the purpose of a gradual repopulation of the world demanded; or to suppose, on the other hand, that all, who perished in the flood, are to perish everlastingly in the lake of fire. To this I can only answer, that I think I have observed, in some parts of Scripture, an anxiety, if the expression may be allowed, of the sacred writers to convey distinct intimations, that the antediluvian race is not uninterested in the redemption, and the final retribution. It is for this purpose, as I conceive, that, in the description of the general resurrection, in the visions of the Apocalypse, it is mentioned, with a particular emphasis, that the “SEA gave up the dead that were in it;” which I cannot be content to understand of the few persons, few in comparison of the total of mankind, lost at different times by shipwreck; a poor circumstance to find a place in the midst of the magnificent images, which surround it; but of the myriads who perished in the general deluge, and found their tomb in the waters of that raging ocean.¹

¹ Roffens, S. (1804). [*Hosea Translated from the Hebrew with Notes Explanatory and Critical and a Sermon on Christ’s Descent into Hell*](#) (Second Edition, pp. 1–18). London: J. Hatchard; J. Robson; F. C. and J. Rivington; T. Becket; Nichols and Son.

Flesh & Spirit

- **Mt 26:41:** ⁴¹...**The spirit** indeed *is willing, but **the flesh** is weak.*” (Mk. 14:38)
- **Lk 24:39:** ³⁹...Handle Me and see, for a **spirit** does not have **flesh** and bones as you see I have.”
- **Jn 3:6:** ⁶That which is born of the flesh is **flesh**, and that which is born of the Spirit is **spirit**.
- **2 Cor. 7:1:** ¹Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the **flesh** and **spirit**, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

37

Gospel Preached To The Dead

1 Pet. 4:6: For this reason **the gospel was preached also to those who are dead**, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit.

45

Preaching to the Spirits in Prison

By [Wayne Jackson](#)

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Because Christ also suffered for sins once, 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; in which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison, that aforetime were disobedient, when the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water (1 Peter 3:18-20).

This difficult passage begins by affirming that Christ died in order to provide the benefits of salvation to unrighteous people. The apostle states that the Lord was put to death in the flesh (his crucifixion), but that he was made alive in the spirit.

What is the meaning of this latter expression? It could mean that his spirit continued to be vitalized with life—even after the death of his body; or else it may indicate that Jesus was made alive again when his spirit re-entered his body at the time of his resurrection from the dead (cf. Romans 1:4; 1 Timothy 3:16).

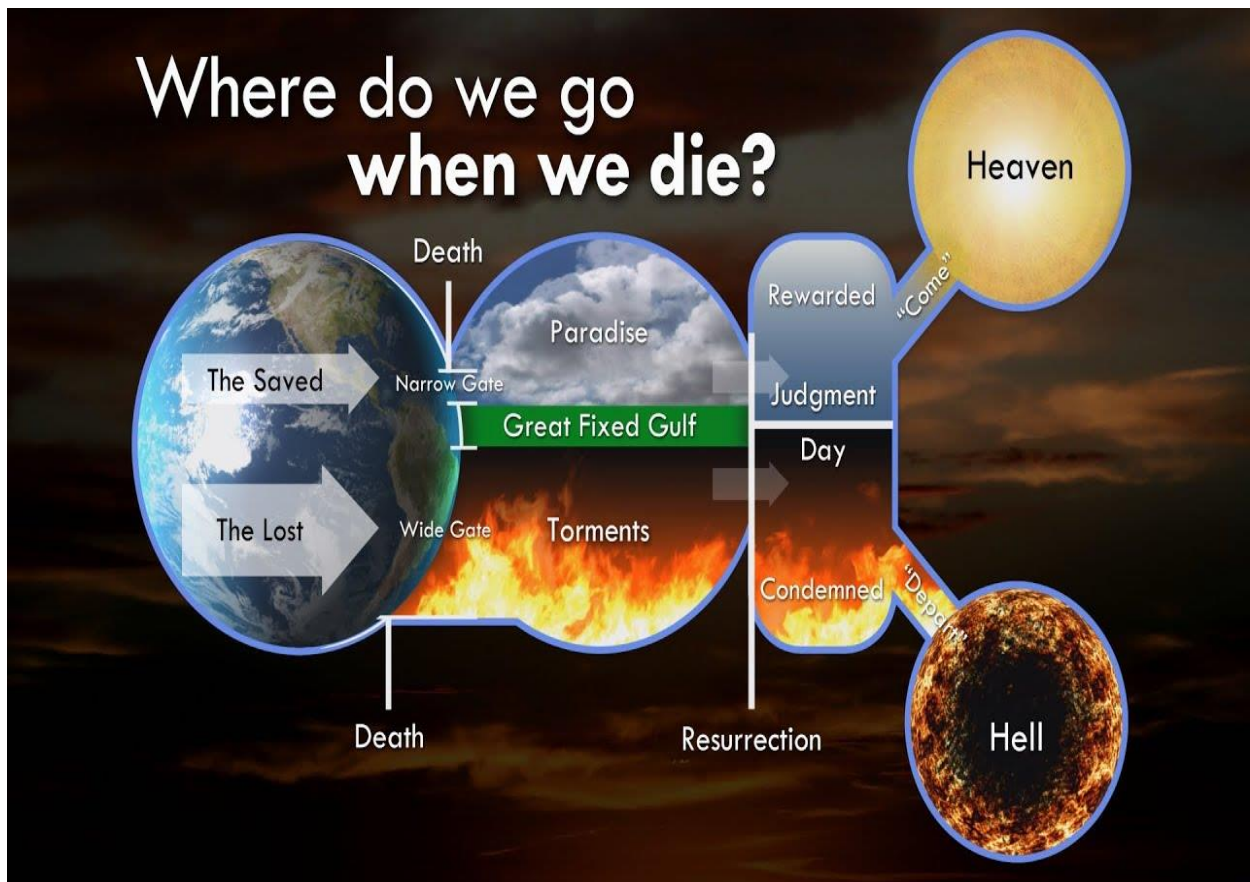
The apostle then says, “in which” (i.e., in his spirit), Christ went and preached unto the “spirits in prison” that were disobedient in the days of Noah.

Some people believe this passage teaches that during the three days his body was in the tomb, Jesus went into the spirit-world of the imprisoned lost. At that time, according to this theory, the Lord preached the gospel to those who died lost during the time of Noah’s flood.

The passage simply cannot mean this—and for the following reasons:

The Bible clearly teaches that following death, there comes judgment (Hebrews 9:27). After one leaves this earth, there is no plan of salvation for him. The spiritual condition in which a person dies (prepared or unprepared) is that which he will possess at the time of the general resurrection (cf. Matthew 25:1-12). There is absolutely no evidence that there is a second chance for redemption following death.

According to Christ's instruction in the narrative regarding the rich man and Lazarus, within the spirit-world (called Hades in the American Standard Version) there is a great gulf "fixed" between the place where evil people abide and the state where good people exist (see Luke 16:26).



The verb “fixed,” in the Greek Testament, is a perfect tense form, suggesting that the gulf is forever fixed. There can never be any crossing. A. T. Robertson called it a “permanent chasm” (1931, 223). A. B. Bruce said the “location is fixed and final” (1956, 589). It thus would hardly have accomplished anything for the Lord to have preached to those in a state of punishment, tantalizing them with the hope of salvation, when they had no chance of entering Paradise.

What, then, does 1 Peter 3:18 teach?

The passage affirms that Jesus Christ, “in the [his] spirit” (not in the flesh), during the days of Noah, proclaimed God’s truth to the evil, pre-flood generation. How did the Lord do that? He was operating **through Noah**, a preacher of righteousness (2 Peter 2:5).

Observe that in this same letter Peter stated that the “Spirit of Christ” was in the Old Testament prophets as they declared Heaven’s message (1:11). This is a key verse in explaining 1 Peter 3:18. When Christ, through Noah, preached to those evil people, they were alive and on the earth. But at the time Peter wrote his letter, they had long been dead, and their spirits were suffering in the prison of hell (known as Tartarus – see 2 Peter 2:4, ASV fn).

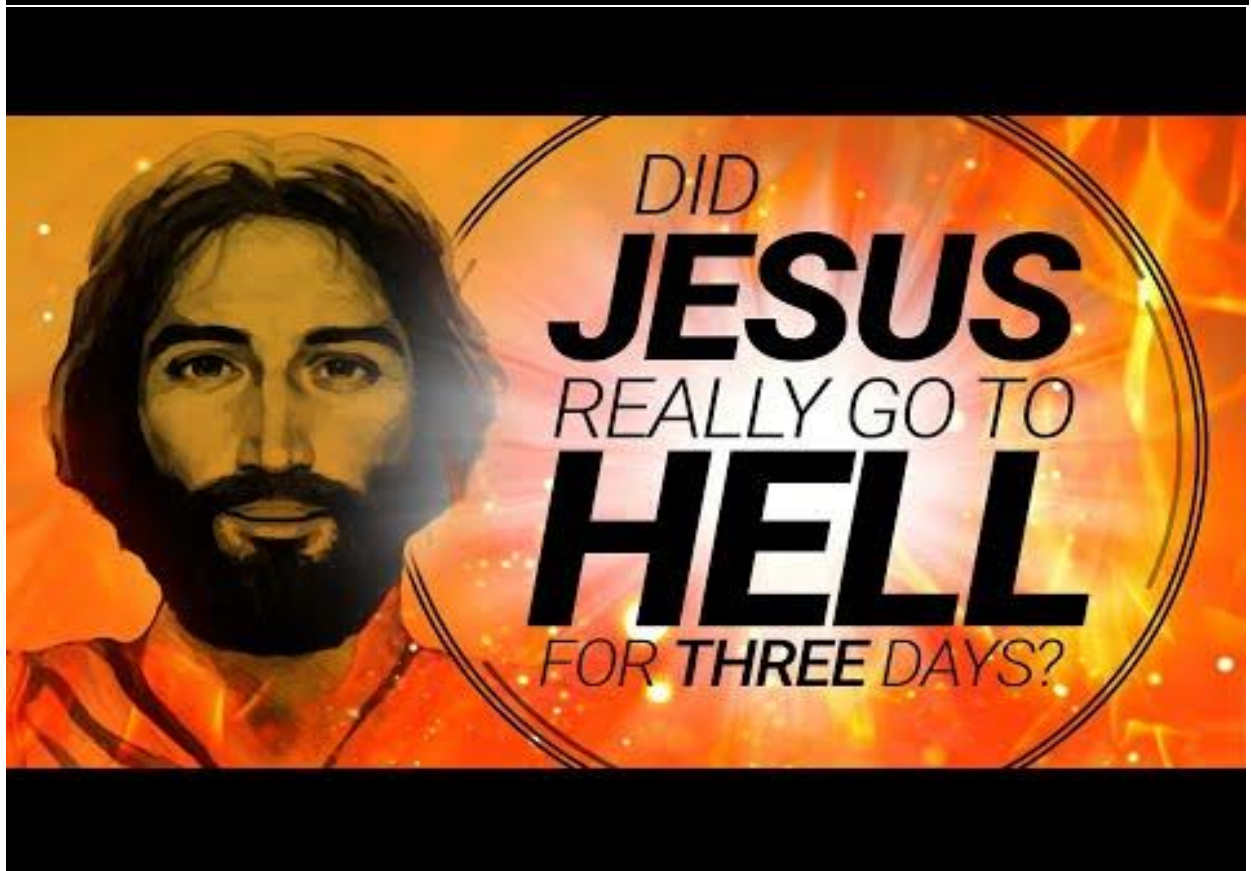
In order to help clarify the meaning of this difficult verse, we might suggest the following paraphrase:

Christ was made alive in the spirit; in which, during the days of Noah, he preached to evil people, whose spirits are now in the prison of Tartarus (punishment).

This type of language reflects a common figure of speech found in the Bible. It is known as **prolepsis**. It involves bringing two time-frames together into one expression. Here is a more current example. If one were to say, “President Abraham Lincoln was born in Kentucky,” he would be combining two time eras into a single sentence. When he was born, Abe Lincoln was not president, but he later became such. However, by this common mode of expression, one associates a current fact with an antecedent event.

So, it is with the reference to 1st Peter 3:18. The preaching was done by Christ through Noah in ancient times; the spirits are currently in a place of confinement.

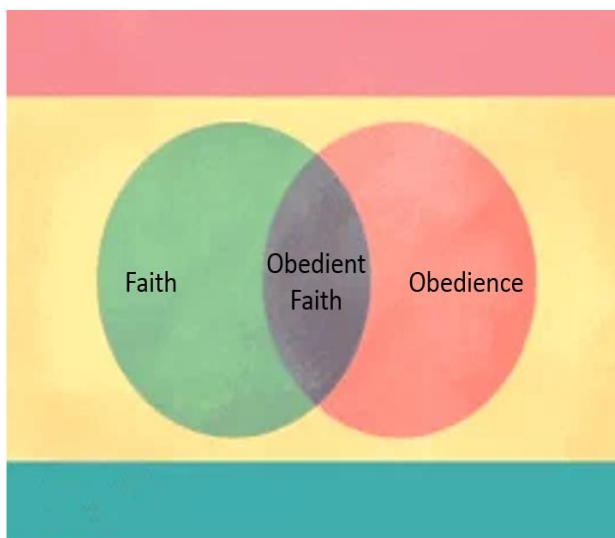
This is a very reasonable interpretation of this verse, and it conforms to what we know of the state of the dead as elsewhere described in the Holy Bible. No meaning can be imposed upon a difficult text which makes it conflict with other clear passages.



AT THE NEXUS OF GRACE & GLORY

Five Steps For Saving:

- **HEARING:**
- Romans 10: 17; Matthew 7: 24 - 27
- **BELIEVING:**
- Hebrews 11: 6; Mark 16: 15, 16
- **REPENTING:**
- Acts 2: 38; 17: 30; Luke 13: 3
- **CONFESSING:**
- Matthew 10: 32, 33; Acts 8: 36, 37
- **BAPTISM:**
- Romans 6: 3 – 5; Acts 8: 36 – 38



O That Will Be Glory

2. *Wh* O that will be glory for me, e grace,

I an Glory for me, glory for me; ce,

When by His grace I shall look on His face, e

That will be glory, be glory for me. me.

