

Scripture Reading: 1st Peter 3:13-22 (NASB - New American Standard Bible)

¹³Who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good? ¹⁴But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. AND DO NOT FEAR THEIR INTIMIDATION, AND DO NOT BE TROUBLED, [Isaiah 8:12] ¹⁵but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; ¹⁶and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame. ¹⁷For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong.

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; ¹⁹in 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, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water.

²¹And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you – not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience – through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²²who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him.

Good morning, everyone. It is good to see you all again. This month, we have been looking at the second and third chapters of the First Epistle of Peter. In the past two weeks, we have read exhortations to keep our behavior excellent among the unbelievers we interact with in society and in particular how we ought to behave in certain relationships in life.

We learned that for the sake of our testimony before unbelievers, it would be good for Christian citizens to be submissive to the governing authorities. That is God's will for a well-ordered society. We also learned that Christian servants ought to be submissive to their masters and be respectful to them. Last week, we learned that Christian wives ought to be submissive to their husbands and be chaste and respectful, while Christian husbands ought to seek to understand their wives and to grant them honor as fellow-heirs of God's gracious gift of life on this earth together. In these ways, we can be a good testimony to the unbelievers around us.

Last week, we saw that Peter concluded his teaching on this topic with these words from chapter 3, verses 8 and 9 – ⁸To sum up, let all be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; ⁹not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing." All our relationships – in the family, in church, in society – ought to be marked with harmony, sympathy, kindheartedness, and humility. And we must not seek revenge when wronged but rather give a blessing. Peter says we were called to inherit God's blessing ... and we ought to invite non-believers into God's kingdom so that they, too, can inherit this blessing from God and be saved. This has been Peter's concern expressed several times in chapters one, two, and three.

In today's passage, we read this in verses 13-14 – ¹³Who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good? ¹⁴But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. AND DO NOT FEAR THEIR INTIMIDATION, AND DO NOT BE TROUBLED [Isaiah 8:12]."

Peter has called his audience "aliens and strangers" on this earth, since we Christians do not belong to this world but rather we are citizens of heaven looking forward to our new home with Christ in the future. The non-Christians around us may criticize us because our lifestyles are so different than theirs, and that is a situation that we have to accept, even if sometimes we suffer unjustly, as we saw in chapter 2. Here in these verses in chapter 3, we read that we could suffer persecution – suffer harm because of our testimony. But, Peter tells us, even if this happens, we need not be troubled and we need not fear. Sometimes, God's people do suffer mistreatment and even suffer death for

the sake of their testimony. But we need not fear because our ultimate future is secure in Christ. Peter explicitly states that if we suffer for the sake of righteousness, we are blessed.

I am reminded of a story in Acts chapter 5. The apostles had been arrested by the temple authorities for preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. After some discussion in the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council, the apostles were physically punished and then released. We read this in Acts 5:40-41 – “⁴⁰They took his advice; and after calling the apostles in, they flogged them and ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and then released them. ⁴¹So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name.” They were “rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for” the name of Jesus Christ and His gospel message. It hurts physically, but you can still rejoice when you have born testimony of Jesus, obeying His command to spread the gospel message.

Returning to 1 Peter 3:14 – “¹⁴But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. AND DO NOT FEAR THEIR INTIMIDATION, AND DO NOT BE TROUBLED, [Isaiah 8:12].” As I mentioned to you before, in the New American Standard Bible, when you see a sentence or phrase all capital letters in the New Testament, it is a quotation from the Old Testament. This quotation comes from Isaiah 8:12. If you look at Isaiah chapter 8, the last phrase of verse 12 says this: “... And you are not to fear what they fear or be in dread of it.” When God’s faithful followers suffer criticism or persecution, we are not to be in fear of it. Verse 13 continues, “It is the LORD of hosts whom you should regard as holy. And He shall be your fear, And He shall be your dread.” You should fear God, not man. Obey Him and remain loyal to Him. The first phrase of verse 14 says, “Then He shall become a sanctuary...” The LORD of hosts is our sanctuary, our holy place – that is the place where we are to dwell. Let us remember that Peter called us a “royal priesthood and a holy nation,” so let us be holy and dedicated completely to the Lord our God.

Let’s return again to 1 Peter 3 and read verses 14 and 15 – “¹⁴But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. AND DO NOT FEAR THEIR INTIMIDATION, AND DO NOT BE TROUBLED, ¹⁵but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence.” *Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts.* Instead of being fearful, remember that God honors righteousness and will bless you for your faithfulness ... and here in verse 15 it states that we are to *sanctify Christ as Lord in our hearts.* He is our Lord. A moment ago when we were looking at Isaiah, I said that the LORD of hosts is our sanctuary where we are to rest and dwell. Now, we see Peter exhorting us to sanctify our hearts – that is, to set apart our hearts as a special sacred place, to make our hearts a place where Christ dwells, where He rules as Lord of our lives. He is the Lord of our hearts, Lord of our desires, and Lord of our activities. All our behavior should honor Him, which was the theme of my previous two sermons. When Christ is Lord of our hearts, we need not fear criticisms from unbelievers. We may get persecution, but we should look at that positively: it is an honor to suffer for the sake of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the gospel message – the message of how people can be reconciled to their Creator, and in being witnesses of this message, we are blessed, Peter says in verse 14.

And let’s read verse 15 one more time – “¹⁵But sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence.” With Christ ruling in our hearts, we ought always to be ready to answer any critics who ask us about the hope that we have in Jesus. With gentleness and respect, let us be prepared to give an account for the hope that is within us whenever we are challenged about our lifestyle and our message.

Let's read verses 16-17 – “¹⁶And keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame. ¹⁷For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong.”

This echoes what we saw two weeks ago. In chapter 2, verse 12, Peter said – “¹²Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation.” Keep a good conscience and keep your behavior excellent, because when you are criticized for doing right, the unbelievers actually glorify God without realizing it.

And chapter 2, verse 15 – “¹⁵For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men.” Do right. That is God's will. The critics have no answer to a life lived by God's righteous standards.

Please note how important it is to Peter that although we are aliens and strangers on this earth and though we Christians are a minority in society, we can make an impact by our good, upright behavior. And by proclaiming the gospel message. Peter has told us how he would like us to live in our society. Next, as he did at the end of chapter 2, he points to Jesus as an example for us.

In 1 Peter 3:18, Peter gives us a one-verse summary of Christ's important work on behalf of mankind – “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.” Here is the marvelous message of the gospel: that Jesus Christ, the righteous One, died for us unrighteous human beings, for the purpose of bringing us to God ... for the purpose of reconciling us with our Creator, after mankind had rebelled against Him and sinned. In the key chapter of Romans 5, we read how Adam had disobeyed God and thus brought sin and death into the world, but that now there is justification (reconciliation with God) offered to all of us through the sacrifice of the second Adam: Jesus Christ.

Let's read Romans 5:12 – “¹²Therefore, just as through one man [Adam] sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned ...” Verse 17 – “¹⁷For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.” Verse 19 – “¹⁹For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous.”

We read here the fundamental doctrine that sin and death came into the world through the disobedience of Adam and that grace and salvation and the gift of life and righteousness come to us through Jesus Christ.

Peter sums up that truth in a single verse in chapter 3 of his epistle, adding the important point that Christ not only died but was also resurrected – Peter says Christ was “put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.” But verse 18 is not the end of his sentence. He has more to say. Unfortunately, what he says in verses 19 and 20 is one of the most puzzling portions of the New Testament and has generated a lot of discussion and controversy.

Let's read 1 Peter 3:18-20 – “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; ¹⁹in 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, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water.”

In verse 18, it says that Christ was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, and then in verse 19, it says that in that spirit Christ made proclamation to spirits now in prison. What does this mean? What kind of prison is this? Who are these spirits? Are they the spirits of dead humans or maybe the spirits of fallen angels (demons)? And what did Christ preach to them? These are some of the questions that have been asked about this passage and there have been a variety of explanations offered for what these phrases mean.

Looking at verse 20, it seems that these spirits were disobedient during the time of Noah when he was constructing the ark. God was patient about something and He kept waiting. And in the ark, a few persons were saved from the flood – eight persons.

What exactly is Peter saying here? With some passages of the New Testament, Bible scholars find it really difficult to discern the flow of thought of the writer. This passage is one of the most difficult in the New Testament to explain. Strikingly different interpretations have been proposed. Good Bible teachers have been unable to come to an agreed consensus on the matter. In preparation for doing my sermon series on 1st Peter, I listened to a really helpful interview with the famous preacher John Piper which I found on YouTube. The video of the interview is entitled “Help me teach 1 Peter, with John Piper” and the discussion takes place at a Bible conference. When they talk about this passage in 1 Peter 3, John Piper readily admits that he does not know what the passage is trying to say. But there are two major theories about what this passage is saying and I will present both of them to you. By the way, these two viewpoints are both discussed in the *ESV Study Bible* and the authors of the study notes do not take a position about which viewpoint they favor.

For the next fifteen minutes or so, I am going to give you a long commentary on these three verses. That may seem like a long time, but I think it is important to give you a full picture of what Peter might be saying in this puzzling passage of scripture.

I will describe the two main viewpoints for you, beginning with the viewpoint that the ancient church father Saint Augustine held and which John Piper says he slightly favors over the alternative viewpoint. This viewpoint notes that Peter calls Noah a “preacher of righteousness” in 2nd Peter 2:5 – “⁵And [God] did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a preacher of righteousness, with seven others, when He brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly...” The Greek noun “preacher” here is closely related to the Greek word “make proclamation” in 1 Peter 3:19 – Christ preached to the spirits now in prison. What Saint Augustine proposed and what many today believe is that the spirit of Christ was preaching through Noah to the ungodly human beings in the society of his day while he was building the ark. It took a long time to build the ark, and during that time Noah could have been preaching to the people. 1 Peter 3:20 says that the spirits now in prison had been disobedient and that God had been patient and kept waiting during the time of Noah. Could this preacher of righteousness been urging the people to repent and join him in the ark? Could God have been patiently waiting for such repentance, giving the people plenty of time to respond to Noah’s message?

By the way, let us take a look at some verses we looked at during my first sermon in this letter by Peter. In the opening lines of the letter, Peter is describing the great salvation we have in Jesus Christ, and in 1 Peter 1:10-11, we read this about the Old Testament prophets – “¹⁰As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful search and inquiry, ¹¹seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow.” The Spirit of Christ was operating in the Old Testament prophets as they prophesied about the coming Messiah. So, could the Spirit of Christ been operating through Noah as he preached righteousness to the unrighteous people of his day? Nobody outside Noah’s family joined him in the ark. Genesis 6:5 says – “Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the

thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” According to the viewpoint I am outlining here, the spirits in prison in 1 Peter 3:19 are the spirits of the wicked people who rejected Noah’s message and perished in the flood. Those spirits are currently in prison, suffering judgment.

This interpretation makes some sense in the context of what Peter has been saying. Just as Noah and his family were a minority in an ungodly society, so the Christians of Peter’s time were a minority of righteous persons in an ungodly society. Just as Noah preached righteousness, so we Christians should preach the gospel of Christ and live upright lives in our society. Noah preached a coming judgment, and in 1 Peter 4 we will see statements of the coming judgment at the end of our current era. And just as Noah and his family were saved, so we Christians also will ultimately be saved from this fallen world.

As I said a few minutes ago, there is a second viewpoint on what this passage in 1 Peter 3 means, and it is very different than the viewpoint I just outlined.

In this second viewpoint, the spirits in prison are not the spirits of dead human beings but rather are evil angels. In the New Testament, whenever you see the word “spirit” in plural form – “spirits” – it is almost always a reference to supernatural beings, such as angels ... both good angels and bad angels. You may have heard that after God created the universe and created angels, about one-third of the angels joined Satan’s rebellion against God. We call these “evil angels” or “fallen angels.” Perhaps in 1 Peter 3:19, the spirits in prison are some of these evil angels who did something really terrible and have been locked up in a prison awaiting final judgment in the future.

In Revelation 20:2-3, we read that at some point, Satan will be bound for a thousand years while Christ reigns on earth and then Satan will be released. In Revelation 20:7, it says Satan will be released from his prison. So, here we see a case where an evil angel is bound in a prison.

Returning to the topic of the spirits in prison in 1 Peter chapter 3, we see an interesting parallel verse in Peter’s second epistle. Do you remember my quote about Noah as a preacher of righteousness in 2nd Peter 2:5? Peter says something interesting – and puzzling – in the previous verse. In 2nd Peter, chapter 2, Peter discusses false teachers among the people and the coming judgment on those teachers. Then in verse 4, we read this – “⁴For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment; ...” Here we see that God punished angels who sinned and cast them into hell – the Greek word Peter uses here for “hell” is unusual: it is *Tartarus* and this is the only verse in the New Testament that uses it. God committed these evil angels to *Tartarus*, to pits of darkness, and reserved them for judgment. Could this be the “prison” mentioned in 1 Peter 3:19? It certainly seems like a strong possibility. In the Epistle of Jude, verse 6, we find a similar statement – “⁶And angels who did not keep their own domain, but abandoned their proper abode, He has kept in eternal bonds under darkness for the judgment of the great day.” This sounds a lot like Peter’s description of angels who sinned and were committed to pits of darkness reserved for judgment.

So, who are these angels who did not keep their own domain but abandoned their proper abode? It has been suggested that these are the beings called “sons of God” in Genesis chapter 6. In the period of time before Jesus was born, a lot of Jewish literature was produced and in that literature we can find a lot of speculation about who those “sons of God” were in Genesis chapter 6 and they were frequently identified as evil angels who had come to earth. Apparently, both Peter and Jude were aware of these ideas and it is possible that the sinful angels they mention are these “sons of God.”

Let us read Genesis 6:1-5 – “¹Now it came about, when men began to multiply on the face of the land, and daughters were born to them, ²that the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful; and they took wives for themselves, whomever they chose. ³Then the Lord said, ‘My

Spirit shall not strive with man forever, because he also is flesh; nevertheless his days shall be one hundred and twenty years.’⁴ The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men, and they bore children to them. Those were the mighty men who were of old, men of renown. ⁵Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.”

The wickedness of man was great on the earth and in verse 3 we see that God has put a time limit on their wickedness: 120 years. Later in this chapter, the one righteous man on earth, Noah, is told to build an ark, which we assume took 120 years to build and that the people had time to repent of their sins, but only Noah’s wife, his three sons and their wives followed him – the rest of mankind did not. Those “sons of God” married the daughters of men and produced offspring. These sons of God and their offspring apparently had an influence on the evil hearts of mankind.

It has been suggested that Peter and Jude had this idea that the “sons of God” were evil angels who had abandoned their proper place to come to earth and they sinned grievously by marrying women and producing children. I have always disliked this identification of the “sons of God” in Genesis as evil angels because I cannot conceive of supernatural creatures being able to produce children – well ... unless, of course, what we have here is demons possessing the bodies of human men in order to produce children. Ah, if that is the case in Genesis 6, then I can understand it. We have examples in the Gospels of demon-possessed persons with extraordinary physical strength. So, maybe this identification is a legitimate idea.

Let’s go back to 1 Peter 3:19. So, maybe these “spirits in prison” are those “sons of God” evil angels who produced children in Genesis 6 and that this sin was so grievous that God locked them up in pits of darkness for a future judgment (Jude 6 and 2 Peter 2:4). Maybe so. Verse 20 says these spirits were disobedient in the days of Noah.

Well, I told you that there are two major viewpoints on who these “spirits in prison” might be. The *ESV Study Bible* mentions both of these and does not favor one viewpoint over another. I told you that I had watched a video of an interview by John Piper on how to teach through 1st Peter. He mentions that the two best commentaries on 1st Peter are ones written by Thomas Schreiner and Wayne Grudem. Wayne Grudem¹ supports the first viewpoint I outlined, that Christ was preaching through Noah to the wicked humans of his day, while Thomas Schreiner² supports the second viewpoint identifying the “spirits in prison” as evil angels who were called “sons of God” in Genesis 6 and who are now bound in prison.

In 1 Peter 3:19, what was the message that Christ proclaimed to the spirits in prison? According to the first viewpoint, it is the message of repentance that Noah preached. According to the second viewpoint, Christ was proclaiming to the evil angels His victory over sin.

I wish I could say more on this topic, but my description of these two viewpoints on verses 18-20 has been overly long. Let us back up and return to the point that Peter wanted to make at the beginning of today’s passage. Verse 13 – “¹³Who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good?” Peter is exhorting his readers to remain steadfast during any kind of criticism or persecution. Verses 15-16a – “¹⁵But sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; ¹⁶and keep a good conscience ...” Christ must be the Lord of our hearts

¹ Wayne A. Grudem, *1 Peter: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 17, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988).

² Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, vol. 37, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003).

and this gives us courage to remain steadfast. And we must keep a good conscience – we must lead clean lives so that those around us will know that we follow the true God.

Peter exhorts us to remain faithful Christians even though we are a minority in society. We read in the following verses that Christ suffered and was victorious, and that Noah and his family were a minority in their society but remained faithful and were saved from the flood. Peter is telling us that God will save us despite the hardships we face and that we will share eternal life with Him.

I will conclude today's message by reading verses 17-22 together. These six verses are a single sentence in the original Greek. Given everything you have heard today, please listen and recall Peter's main point in bringing up the story of Noah and his faithfulness in an ungodly society.

1 Peter 3:17-22 – “¹⁷For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong. 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; ¹⁹in 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, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water. ²¹And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you – not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience – through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²²who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him.”

Peter sees a correspondence between the salvation of Noah and his family in the ark and our own baptism, which isn't a mere water ritual cleaning the dirt off our bodies but is a picture of our own death to our previous unrighteous lifestyles and a picture of our resurrection to a new life honoring God. Note that after Jesus ascended into heaven, He is now seated at the right hand of God. This happens after His victory over angels and authorities and powers by His life, death, and resurrection. This term “authorities and powers” is a reference to evil demonic forces, as we see in Ephesians 1:22, 6:12, and Colossians 2:15.

I want to close today with a look at the next two verses. 1 Peter 4:1-2 – “¹Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, ²so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.” Peter has written all of this to us because he wants us to follow Christ's example, to not be afraid of suffering, and to forsake our old lives of sin and to live according to the will of God.

That is the main message of today's sermon:

Remain faithful in the midst of persecution and criticism, even though we are a minority in an ungodly society. And be a witness of the gospel message: salvation through the victorious death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.