

Noah & Spirits in Exile

Well hey everybody, Kent here. Thanks for watching or listening in to the teaching for this week. If you have a bible, turn with me to 1 Peter chapter 3. If you happen to be watching a teaching of ours for the first time, we are in the middle of a series through the book of 1 Peter. And one of the things that happens when you teach straight through a book of the bible is that you come across some passages that you might not opt to teach on otherwise. And today is certainly one of those passages. The passage we're about to read covers a lot of different topics very quickly, and some of those things are a little odd or at least unfamiliar to us today.

So all that to say, today's teaching is probably going to feel the slightest bit *technical*. There will probably be a moment or two where you feel just a little like you're in a seminary class as we walk through this passage. But I'll make you a couple promises as we do that. One, I'll do my best to keep the technical portions of the teaching as brief as I can. Two, I will promise you that by the end there will be some practical implications for us, specifically in how we think about baptism and in how we approach our relationship with Jesus in general. So relevance *is* coming—it might just take us a few to get there.

So let's read the passage all the way through, and then we'll go back through and pick apart through some of the more difficult portions of it. This is 1 Peter 3, starting in v. 18:

*[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, [19] in which he went and proclaimed to the **spirits in prison**, [20] because they formerly did not obey, **when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared**, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. [21] **Baptism, which corresponds to this**, now **saves** you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, [22] who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.*

Sooooo...can I just assume that everybody is crystal clear on what all of that means? I mean, just to recap, in four short verses, we've covered Jesus' crucifixion, death, resurrection, him preaching to some type of imprisoned spirits, the story of Noah's ark, *baptism*, Jesus' *ascension*, and then he just peppers in a bit about angels.

So, if you're not careful, it would be easy to read this passage kind of like Peter is the random conspiracy theorist uncle at your annual family Thanksgiving get-together. You know, the one that just brings up random things that he thinks are connected, but absolutely aren't? Like, you go, "How you doing, Uncle Randy?" And he says, "I'm good. Real good. Other than the fact that Bill Gates is obviously the anti-Christ and is summoning the aliens to invade next week, which is obviously why I strictly drink filtered prune juice." And you're like, "cool—those are three things that have absolutely nothing to do with each other, or with what any of us were talking about." And if you only read this passage at a surface-level, it's easy to get that kind of vibe from it. It makes you go, 1) what in the world is he talking about here? And 2) what in the world do any of these things have to do with each other?

But if it helps, you're not alone in being confused by this passage. Talking about this text in the bible specifically, Martin Luther, the great Reformation theologian, once said this:

A wonderful text this is. And a more obscure passage than any other anywhere in the bible. Therefore, I do not know for a certainty what Peter means at all.

And at least on *that point*, I think *most* of us are in 100% agreement with Martin Luther. A lot of smart people have written and commented on this passage, and spoiler alert: *none* of them are 100% certain about what Peter is referencing here. Most of them just simply present two or three good options and say "I don't know...maybe one of these?" And in a way, I think all of that should be comforting for those of us who are regularly trying to study the Scriptures. **It's important to remember that studying the Scriptures sometimes feels more like a journey than a destination.** Because even smarter people than you and I, with more degrees in bible than you and I have, *themselves* aren't 100% locked in on what every passage in the bible means.

So for our purposes today, **here's the deal: I don't think I'm gonna settle anything for us this morning that all those other people, who are smarter than I am, couldn't settle.** So what I'm going to do is just spend a few minutes here in a bit telling you which explanation of this passage makes the *most* sense to *me*. And then **for the majority of our time together, we'll just talk about how knowing the exact events Peter refers to here, really doesn't have that much of an impact on the overall point he's making.**

So on that note, let's just **remind ourselves of the overall point that Peter is making.** As a refresher, this letter that we call *1 Peter* was written to early followers of Jesus living

under the nose of the Roman Empire. And in the letter, his goal is to help them figure out how to live in a somewhat hostile environment: how they should respond when people mistreat them, malign them, and exclude them. Because Peter's take is that by responding well to those scenarios, they actually have the ability to point even the people who mistreat them to the way of Jesus.

So the last three weeks, we've heard Peter talk about how to do that in the context of various types of societal structures and relationships. Today, he's going to recap the *motivation* behind all of that. *Why exactly* should they respond to mistreatment by blessing those who mistreat them? And that's where we pick it up, in v. 18:

[18] For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God—

So here again, Peter reminds us that the reason we should respond to evil with blessing is *because that's precisely what Jesus did for us. He* (the righteous) *suffered for us* (the unrighteous). And it was him doing that that made our relationship with God possible in the first place. His suffering, his mistreatment, bridged this relational gap between us and God that could not have been bridged otherwise. And now, as followers of Jesus, we are called to follow in those footsteps. Though we may be acting *righteously* in certain scenarios, we may still suffer *because* of others who are *unrighteous* in their actions. And in those moments, we have an opportunity to point people to Jesus in how we respond. We will sometimes have the opportunity to endure mistreatment so that others might be "brought to God" as well.

So far, I think, that's all pretty followable. But what comes *next* is a little tougher. So let's read v. 18 once again, and this time continue on into v. 19 and 20:

[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, [19] in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, [20] because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water.

Okay. So let's take a crack at this. Just to streamline things a *little*, I think it may help to break it down into three questions. The *main* questions we need to answer about what we just read are:

- *When* did Jesus preach?
- *Who* did Jesus preach to?
- *What* did Jesus preach?

So here comes the technical portion of the teaching. If this isn't your cup of tea, just bear with us—relevance is coming. First up...

***When* did Jesus preach?**

This part to me, is actually pretty clear. Because it says it was once Jesus was “put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.” That’s a pretty clear timeline to me. It seems like whatever is happening, it is happening right around the time of Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension. I personally lean towards around the time of his ascension specifically, but I won’t get into all of that today. So that’s *when* Jesus preached. Next...

***Who* did Jesus preach to?**

This is where it gets a little bit hazier. It could be that Jesus preached to some group of deceased people who disobeyed God at the time of Noah and the flood. That’s probably the *safest* assumption. But also, we have some evidence from the bible and sources around this time that “spirits in prison” could refer to the idea of *fallen angels*. So the consensus is that when Satan rebelled and became Satan, there were also a group of angels that rebelled *with* him, and became opposed to God and his purposes. So this *might* be referencing *them*. *Anywho*, next one:

***What* did Jesus preach?**

So this is a little tricky, but when you and I think of “preaching” or “proclaiming,” we generally think of something like I’m doing right now: unpacking the good news of Jesus for people in hopes that people will respond to it for the first time, or the fifth time, or the hundredth time, or whatever. And this passage *could* mean *that*: that somehow Jesus went and gave a “second chance” to these people or spirits to respond to the gospel and repent.

But while that’s *possible*, that would be at odds with a lot of *other* places in the bible that talk about how there’s only *one* chance to respond to the gospel: while you’re *alive*.¹ So if in this passage, Jesus is offering these “imprisoned spirits” a *second* chance to respond to the gospel, Jesus would have some ‘splainin’ to do, biblically speaking.

¹ Daniel 12:1-2, Matthew 25:31-46, Luke 16:19-31 (specifically v. 26), 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10, others.

So I think it's *more likely* that what Jesus is "proclaiming" to these spirits *here* is simply a message of victory and triumph over evil. I don't think he's giving them a chance to repent—he's proclaiming to them that through his resurrection, he has once and for all defeated the powers of Satan, sin and darkness in our world, and that their days are now numbered. So his message isn't invitational in nature, it's triumphal. And that would make a little more sense, since we do have some evidence of *that* happening in other parts of the bible.²

So that is my *best attempt* at unpacking what Peter might be referencing in this passage. Again, that is just *my* take on it all—plenty of smart people read it differently than that, and you are welcome to read it differently than that as well. On the spectrum of "essential issues of doctrine" to "non-essential," the precise details of this passage would definitely be in the "non-essential" category.

And that's because Peter's *point* in all of that is to simply to draw out a comparison: just as the early Christians he writes to were persecuted and maligned, Jesus was also persecuted and maligned. Just like Peter's audience was mistreated, so was Jesus. **And just like all of that wasn't the end of the story for Jesus, it also won't be the end of the story for the followers of Jesus that Peter writes to.** Peter is trying to help them see that the way they are treated currently isn't the end of the road. It is not where their story ends. That one day that will all be over, and they will be victorious like Jesus. That just like Jesus was eventually vindicated, his audience ultimately will be too. And that reality should bring them *hope*.

And most *likely*, that's also why Peter brings in the story of *Noah*. There are *also* quite a few similarities between the situation of Peter's audience and the story of *Noah*:³

- Noah and his family were a minority surrounded by unbelievers who were hostile to them; Peter's audience is too.
- Noah was a righteous presence in the midst of unrighteousness; Peter's audience is called to do that as well.
- Noah trusted God by doing what God told him to do, even when it wasn't easy; Peter is calling his audience to do the same.
- And finally, Noah and his family were ultimately saved from the judgment of God; Peter encourages his audience that they will ultimately be saved from the judgment of God too.

² Psalm 68:18 cf. Ephesians 4:8, Isaiah 53:12, Colossians 2:14-15, others.

³ These are all heavily borrowed from Karen Jobes' commentary on 1 Peter, p. 258.

So it seems like part of what Peter is trying to do is **show his audience that they weren't alone**. He connects *their* story to both Jesus and Noah and says “just like they came out of their situations ultimately victorious, you will too.”

And *then* he connects all of *that*, to baptism. (Does anybody have just a little bit of bible whiplash yet?) Take a look with me, back in v. 21:

*[21] **Baptism, which corresponds to this** [meaning “to Noah being saved via the ark”], **now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, [22] who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.***

Now, it's important to get that **when Peter says that baptism “saves” us, he doesn't mean the *act itself* of baptism is what saves us**. He actually tries to clarify that two different ways in the passage. First, he says it saves you “not as a removal of dirt from the body”—in other words, it's not the *physical act* of baptism that does the saving. And second, he then clarifies that baptism saves you “...through the resurrection of Jesus.” In other words, it's not actually going under the water and coming back up that saves you—it's Jesus' *resurrection* that saves you. Just like it wasn't ultimately the *ark* that saved Noah's family—it was *God* that saved them. So **contrary to what some church traditions teach, being baptized is not actually what makes you a Christian. Rather, we might say baptism is a *symbol* of what saves you.**

But I want you to hear me say, that's not to *trivialize baptism*. **Though baptism is a symbol, it is a very necessary symbol**. So think about it like a *wedding ring*. So I wear a wedding ring on my finger as a way of communicating that I am married. Now, that *doesn't* mean the wedding ring itself is what *makes* me married. If I was single, and I went out and bought a wedding ring to wear, that wouldn't make anything true of me that wasn't already true of me before I put it on. Because a wedding ring isn't what makes you married. What makes you married is *getting married*. Well, in the same way, getting *baptized* doesn't *make you* a Christian. It doesn't make anything true of you that wasn't already true of you before you got baptized.

But *at the same time*, if I'm married and outright *refuse* to ever wear a wedding ring, or participate in any *other* type of public indication that I am married, you would probably include that there was something seriously wrong with me and/or my marriage. If I

refused to ever acknowledge in any public way that I was a Christian, you would cast doubt on the validity (or at least on the *health*) of my marriage relationship. Because while a wedding ring is just a symbol, it is a very *important* symbol. Well, in a similar way, baptism may just be a symbol, but it is a necessary symbol. **If we say we follow Jesus, but see no need to participate in the *main symbol* that the bible that publicly identifies us with Jesus, something is likely off in our relationship with him.**

As Peter says in the passage, baptism is “an appeal to God for a good conscience.” It’s a way of publicly acknowledging, “my life now belongs to Jesus. I have died to who I once was, and the me that is now alive is submitted completely to who Jesus is and what he’s called me to.” So hopefully at some point in the future, when we can all *finally* get to gather in person on Sundays, the plan is that we are going to have quite a few people from among our church family get baptized. And before they get baptized, you’re going to get to hear them tell their story. You’re going to get to hear how once upon a time, they were far from God, had no interest in God, and had no love for God. But then they’re going to tell you how, one way or another, they heard about Jesus. And how, as a result of that, they began to decide to turn *from* their sin and instead follow Jesus. And they’re going to each say, in their own words and in their own way, “the old me is dead, and the new me is now alive.” And then what you will witness is them going under the water, and coming back out, as a way of demonstrating that reality publicly. And if you were around *last year* for Easter, you know we make a *huge* deal out of that. Because baptism is an absolutely *beautiful* thing.

Pause & Reflect

So I want us to pause and reflect on a couple questions. And the first one one might be the *easiest* question we’ve had yet in these teachings. It’s very simple, yes or no: **have I been baptized since beginning to follow Jesus?** I told you: super easy. That’s the question I want you to consider.

A lot of you have. Others of you are getting baptized with *us* very soon. Others of you still would probably say you were baptized as a baby or as a small child. And while that’s valuable and I’m glad your family did that, the reality is that you probably weren’t actively following Jesus as a baby (unless you were just way more self-aware as a baby than I was). So we would encourage you, if you *now have* begun to follow Jesus, to get baptized *now* as a symbol of submitting your entire life to Jesus. As a way of proclaiming publicly, “the old me is dead, and the new me is now living.”

If you *haven't* been baptized and are realizing that maybe you *should*, you can actually use this time to head over to citychurchknox.com/baptism and let us sign up. Maybe *your* baptism can be a part of that big celebration when we all get back together. But that's the first question: **have I been baptized since beginning to follow Jesus?** So take a quick second, pause the teaching and reflect on that question, and respond however you need to respond.

Now, if your answer to that first question is "yes, I have," I've got another question I want *you* to reflect on, and it's this: **does my life reflect what baptism portrays?** As we mentioned just a moment ago, baptism is meant to communicate that the old me is dead, and the new me is now alive. That's why in baptism, your *entire* body goes under the water, and your *entire* body comes back out. Because you're saying *all of me* now belongs to Jesus. So the question is does your life, reflect that reality?

There's this story from back in the twelfth century about the Knights Templar, who considered themselves to be some sort of Christian army during the Crusades. And the story is about how, when these knights were baptized, they would actually hold their swords up out of the water while they went under for baptism. It was this sort of symbolic way of saying, "God, you can have all of me, except for my inclination towards violence and war. Baptize all of me *except* that." So they would hold their swords up out of the water to communicate it.

Now to *us* that probably seems like such a ridiculous, obviously wrong thing to do. But I'll say this about the Knights Templar: at least they were *honest* about what they were doing. At least they were *acknowledging* the hypocrisy in it. Some of us aren't quite that honest. Some of us *today* are operating under similar premises. "God you can have *all of me except* my anger and bitterness." "God you can have *all of me except* my relationship with my boyfriend or girlfriend." "God you can have *all of me except* how I spend my *money*." "God you can have all of me except my life dreams and career goals." You fill in the blank, but I would bet if we had "honest baptisms" like the Knights did, some of us would be holding things up out of the water as well.

So those of you who have been baptized, who claim to be followers of Jesus, I want you to ask the question **does my life reflect what baptism portrays?** If you were honest about it, what would it be that you are holding up outside of the water? What is it that you have yet to submit to the good and loving authority of Jesus in your life? Take a second, pause the teaching, and reflect on that question now.

Okay. With all that unpacked and considered, I just want to conclude by reflecting on these words from Jesus, found in Matthew 16:25. Take a look at this. It says this:

For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.

So **this call to submit the entirety of our life to Jesus is not *just* a command, it's also a promise.** And it's a *two-sided* promise. Anyone who wants to save their life will lose it. Meaning, if you try to cling to any number of things that make your life what it is—if you try to hold them outside the reach of Jesus—Jesus says you will eventually lose your life. And here's why, because those things won't provide you with *life*. They can't offer that to you. So if you're clinging to something other than Jesus for *life* and vitality and joy and fulfillment, you will eventually, one way or another, lose your "life." If all you care to do is to save it, you will lose it.

But, Jesus says, for anyone willing to *lose* their life, they will save it. **For anyone willing to submit even the best things in their life to the good reign of Jesus the king, what you will find as a result is not *less* life, but rather *true life*.** Do not ever buy the lie that Jesus is *only* trying to take things from you. Don't buy the lie that he only wants you to give things up. He sometimes does want that, *but* he always wants to give you something better. The question is *are you willing to follow him into that?* Are you willing to lose your "life," so you can save it?

This passage in 1 Peter ends by saying that this Jesus is now in heaven and is at the right hand of God, with all angels, authorities, and powers subjected to him. Believe it or not, accept it or not, Jesus *is Lord*. He does have all power and all authority in heaven and on earth. The only question is will you live your life under the reality of that authority, or set yourself against it?

It's been said before that **lots of people want Jesus as their savior, but not as their lord.** I've found that to be so true. We want Jesus *available* to save us for our sins, but we don't want him to *show* us how to live in freedom from our sin. We want him to *rescue* us, but we don't want to let him *teach* us. The problem is that he doesn't give us that option. Jesus isn't a "pick-and-choose" kind of guy. If you don't want Jesus as your lord, you actually don't want him as your savior either. But if you're willing to let him be lord, you'll find he's quite the savior as well.

Jesus went to the cross, died a brutal death, and came back from the dead to save you. His death is entirely and completely sufficient to do just that. But **he didn't save you to leave you the same. He didn't save you to leave you unchanged. He died to form you, to *transform* you, more and more into who he's made you to be.** And for that, he needs to be not just your savior, but your lord. So the question for all of us is *do we want that?*

So we'll land things there. Let me pray for us.