

Fact Sheet for **“There Be Elephants in the Room”** **1 Peter 3:18-4:6**

Pastor Bob Singer
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I've titled this sermon "There Be Elephants in the Room" because it presents some large and challenging interpretive questions. It contains some of the most difficult exegetical problems in the NT. But there is also a very up-to-date application of this passage to our time. To start, 1 Peter 3:18-22 illustrates the principle Peter just gave in 3:13-17. Our Savior experienced this.

ESV 3:18 **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,**

The single Greek word behind the English translation "once" means "once for all time", *not* "once for all people". It is the same word found in Romans 6:10. The Greek is literally "put to death in flesh" (*not* "in the flesh") "but made alive in spirit" (*not* "in the spirit"). The ESV, NAU (New American Standard), and NET do not capitalize "spirit". The KJV, NIV, NKJV, and NLT do. The KJV and the NKJV additionally have "by the Spirit". The reason for the differences is that the translators of these versions are divided on whether this is a reference to the Holy Spirit or not. However, one thing is clear. This is a reference to Jesus' death and resurrection. The single Greek word translated "in the spirit" is used only three times in 1 Peter... here, in 4:6 (that we will cover later today), and also in 1:12. In 1:12 where Peter meant "Holy Spirit" he included the word "Holy". In 3:18 and 4:6 he did not. Could there be another possibility? Yes. "In flesh" could easily refer to Christ in His human time on earth, and "in spirit" would refer to Christ in His resurrected life.¹

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.

"In which" is a reference to "in spirit" of verse 18. In Christ's resurrected life He "went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison". The Bible says very little about the time between Jesus' death and resurrection. When Jesus was on the cross He said to one thief "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 24:43). This is a reference to the good side of Sheol (see the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31), and is referenced in the Apostle's Creed ("He descended into hell").

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Who are these spirits? What does "in prison" mean? What did the resurrected Jesus preach to them? If these are people from both the OT and the NT who have rejected God in life, then do they get a second chance to believe after they die and are in hell? An extremely important question to ask is, "Why did Peter reference Noah?" If he was writing about people since Adam and Eve who rejected God then Peter could have gone anywhere in human history. Why did he reference Noah? In 2 Peter 2:4-5 there is a clue. Peter's reference to "chains" there fits well his reference to "prison" in 3:19. And both passages reference Noah. There is another NT verse (Jude 6). This again fits Peter's reference to those in prison. And if you go back into the Genesis account of Noah and the flood there is this passage... Genesis 6:1-8.

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These spirits in prison are likely the fallen angels referenced in these other passages. Also, the word "proclaimed" (rendered "preached" in the KJV, NET, NKJV, and NLT) means "proclaimed or announced. There will be a very different word rendered "preached" in 4:6. Here, Christ announces to the fallen angels His victory and their doom.

¹ Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, 6:417, 447; 7:143.

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.**

It's obvious that Peter is *not* saying that being physically baptized is what saves you. What saves you is the appeal to God for a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are forgiven, through faith, because Jesus paid our debt in His death and resurrection. We live in fellowship with Christ when we walk in the light (1 John 1:5-10). And we are going to pay a price in the world for it.

^{4:1} **Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, ² so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God.**

Notice that Peter continues nicely with the context of his letter. Peter is also here presenting much of the same thought that Paul wrote about in Romans 6:1-14.

³ **For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry. ⁴ With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you; ⁵ but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.**

Think about the changes in our culture today brought about by laws, particularly in the area of sexuality. What is sinful is being embraced as being righteous. What is righteous is being framed as discriminatory, and even unlawful. We might be judged so by the world in this life, but remember... God's Word states "they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead."

⁶ **For this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does.**

I mentioned that the word "preached" here is from a different Greek word than that in 3:19. In 3:19 it means "proclaimed" or "announced". Here it is translated from a Greek word meaning "evangelized". This is why all the major translations have something like "the gospel was preached." These English words all are from this single Greek word.

"was preached" – past tense

"to those who are dead" – Peter does not have in mind the fallen angels of 3:19. Peter does have in mind those saints in Christ who are now dead. They are included in his reference of the previous verse "they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead". Peter is just continuing the context.

"That" translates a word meaning "in order that". There is a purpose in their evangelization... that they might live!

"might live" – certainly in eternity, possibly in this life

"In flesh" and "in spirit" are the same words, and in the same grammatical form, as those referring to Christ in 3:18.

ESV 3:18 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,

Even though the saints Peter references were judged in this life by the unrighteous as being evil, they will live a resurrected life like Christ.

Again, here is the application. The moment we place our faith in Christ for salvation is not the end of our commitment to Him, it is the beginning. It is what makes it possible for us to live daily for Him. We may pay a cost for this when we make righteous choices today and refuse to affirm or go along with sinful choices. But Christ also suffered for righteousness in this life, and we are called to the same. Just remember... we will one day give an account to Him who will judge the living and the dead.