

- I. Be Holy In All Your Behavior With A Holiness Like God's Holiness
  - A. Today, our study in I Peter brings us into two portions that have been interpreted in various ways over the years. It is not my goal to clear up the controversies, but rather to teach us how to look at difficult to understand portions of scripture, what to beware of, and what we can do with these two difficult to fully understand statements in I Peter.
  - B. I Peter 3:17-4:2 . . . For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong. [18] For 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 [in the spirit] He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, [20] who 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. [21] 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, [22] who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him. [4:1] Therefore, 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, [2] so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.
  - C. Pray
- II. A Difficult to Understand Portion – Jesus Proclaims Something to Someone
  - A. I Peter 3:19-20 . . .in which also [i.e., in the spirit] He [Jesus] went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, [20] who 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.
  - B. The larger context for these two verses begins back in I Peter 2:13, where Peter takes up his teaching on the importance for Christians to have a mindset and outward demeanor that is humbly submissive and respectful toward those who are mistreating us, including those who are in a position of authority over us. The smaller context within the larger context begins

with I Peter 3:13, where Peter begins talking about suffering for doing right as have certain benefits and rewards. He also talks about how it is better to suffer for doing good rather than evil, and that it is even better to suffer for doing good if God should will it so.

1. Of course, the specific suffering Peter is referring to is mistreatment from others, and the doing what is right refers to our words and deeds that come out of humble submission and respect shown to those mistreating us.
2. Now if you follow the context, you see Peter beginning to move more and more toward the suffering side of doing God's will and the earthly and eternal benefits that come from such suffering – which includes benefitting others as well as ourselves.
3. And as Peter has done before, he uses Christ's suffering and death is the perfect example of benefitting others, for it is His suffering and death that brings us life.

C. Now, in the midst of showing how Jesus suffered according to God's will, and how His suffering brought about God's intended great good, and how Jesus was blessed as a result of willingly submitting to God's will, Peter makes this difficult to understand statement about Jesus, in the spirit, *going and making proclamation to the spirits now in prison, who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark.*

1. As I said in the beginning of today's teaching, it is not my goal to clear up the meaning of this difficult to understand portion of scripture. Rather, I want to use this difficult to understand portion of scripture to teach us what to beware of – generally speaking, and what we can do with these words – specifically.
2. So the first thing I want to do is to give you an idea of where we are going. Simply stated, this difficult statement ties together Christ's example of suffering according to God's will (on the one side), with Peter's teaching about baptism and the role baptism and suffering play in bringing about our spiritual transformation from practicing sinners to being holy in all our behavior as God is holy.
3. The second thing I want to point out is that this statement lacks sufficient clarity, even in its context, to provide a well-defined and reasonably defended understanding of each particular part of this statement. In other words, in spite of all the efforts to bring clear answers to the reasonable questions raised by this statement, in my opinion, it cannot be done – though it has been tried by many.

4. For example:
  - a. Who are the spirits now in prison?
    - (1) Are they the unbelievers who died in the flood?
    - (2) Are they the unbelievers who died from the time of Adam's expulsion from the Garden to the time of Christ's death on the cross?
    - (3) Are they the fallen angels who sided with Lucifer, and at some point came to earth and had children with human women?
  - b. What did Christ preach?
    - (1) Was it a second chance for repentance?
    - (2) Was it an explanation concerning His redemptive work?
    - (3) Was it about the final judgment and eternal damnation that awaits those unbelievers to whom He preached?
  - c. When did Christ preach?
    - (1) Was it between his death and resurrection?
    - (2) Was it after his resurrection but before his ascension?
5. It is possible you are thinking that these questions are trivial and not worth asking, but you may also be thinking they are vital because the right answers open up new insight into the deeper things of God. Regardless, let us agree there is no wrong done in raising such questions, and neither is it wrong to investigate such questions to see if we can answer them in a clear, Biblically supported way.
  - a. What becomes a problem is coming up with answers that are really one's best guess and then treating those best guess answers as fact. This is a problem because it too easily leads to using best guess answers –
    - (1) to teach something that has nothing to do with the context,
    - (2) to teach something that cannot be clearly and definitively supported from other scripture,
    - (3) and to create a teaching that leads folks away from scripture truth and/or from what is eternally important – such as being meek and humble of heart.
  - b. I believe church history shows that when we read our personal ideas and best guess answers into the scripture so that we use a difficult to understand portion to teach something new, or something that is unique to historically orthodox Christianity, we open the door to misleading teaching that takes its followers away from God's purposes for His church, and we make a way for cults to grow out of the church.
  - c. Example: I Peter 2:24b . . . for by His wounds you were healed.

6. To show you what I mean, let me give you five examples of best guess answers to the who, what, and when of Peter's difficult to understand portion of scripture. These have all been taught as fact.
  - a. During the 100 years that Noah was building the ark, Christ, in spirit form, was in Noah and therefore preaching through Noah the message of repentance and righteousness to the unbelievers at that time. Having died in the flood, those unbelievers are now spirits in prison, that is, hell. It appears Augustine is the first to use this idea as an explanation of Peter's difficult words.
  - b. After Christ died, He went to hell and preached the message of salvation to the unbelievers who lived from Adam to the time of Christ, offering them a second chance at repentance. Some expand this view to include Christ preaching salvation to fallen angels, but always excluding the devil himself.
  - c. After Christ died, He went to hell and proclaimed triumph over the devil, sin, and death. Then He proclaimed that those in hell were condemned to eternal damnation, with no escape. This view was promoted by early Lutheran theologians.
  - d. After Christ died, He proclaimed release to those, who, as the flood waters rose and at the last moments of their life, repented and so were imprisoned in Purgatory, waiting for Christ's redeeming work to free them and bring them to heaven. This view has been promoted by some Catholic theologians.
  - e. Sometime after Christ's death and before His ascension, He went to hell and proclaimed His triumph over the devil and those fallen angels who sinned further by marrying human women sometime between Adam's expulsion from the Garden and before the time of the flood. This seems to be the dominant view in Protestant literature today, and it is strongly supported by those who believe Genesis 6:1-4 refers to fallen angels fathering children with earthly women. "*Now it came about, when men began to multiply on the face of the land, and daughters were born to them, [2] that the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful; and they took wives for themselves, whomever they chose. [3] Then 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.*"

7. Now you may be wondering why I am giving you this information. My reason is twofold.
  - a. First, I want to caution you against taking seriously the kind of scripture interpretation that takes an obscure or hard to explain passage and gives it a matter of fact explanation that has little or nothing to do with the surrounding context, and which lacks support from the rest of the scriptures, and which lacks support from accepted church teaching of the church for at least the first 1500 years.
  - b. Second, I want to encourage you to accept the fact that there are obscure or unexplainable statements in scripture, but they do not change all that is clear and essential for salvation and sanctification.
  
- D. When we started today, I said I would show you what we can do with other similar portions of scripture by recommending what we ought to do with this portion.
  1. First, I want to remind you that Peter himself cautions against taking Paul's hard to understand portions and distorting them to our own destruction (II Peter 3:16). We are wise to apply that same advice to this section in I Peter and all other portions of hard to understand scriptures.
  2. Second, all hard to understand scriptures are part of a context. They do not stand alone. Therefore, examine the context to see how the hard to understand portion contributes to the flow of the context, rather than trying to give a plausible explanation to the hard to understand part as if it is separate from the context.
  3. Third, the purity of your heart, the quality of your character, and the godliness of your behavior are far more important than being able to explain the obscure or difficult scriptures. So focus on those scriptures that lead to a spiritually transformed life, and only give attention to the hard to understand portions as you have need or time to do so.
  
- E. If we look at this difficult portion here in I Peter 3:18 in light of the context, we see that Peter began this section back in 2:13 by exhorting us to be humbly submissive and respectful to those mistreating us.
  1. He continued that theme by giving us three examples – government, the work place, and the home – of when and how to apply this principle. He then gave us Christ as the supreme example of having this kind of attitude and behavior in the face of mistreatment.

2. Next, Peter provides encouragement and hope for living this way by reminding us that righteousness has its own rewards – which in this case are the rewards for being humbly submissive and respectful toward those mistreating you. And of course, unrighteousness has its own costs or penalties.
  3. He then points out that sometimes God wills us to suffer for righteousness sake in specific situations in order to further His purposes of redeeming, saving, and transforming sinners.
  4. At this point, Peter raises Christ as the classic example of someone who suffered according to the will of God in order to bring God's salvation and sanctification to us. Yet it is also at this point that Peter does two things that at first glance seem to bewilder and change the direction of where he was going.
    - a. First, he makes two statements that are hard to understand:
      - (1) The first essentially being: "in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison."
      - (2) And the second being: "Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you."
    - b. Second, Peter begins to introduce the truth that suffering as a Christian, by its nature, has a transforming and sanctifying effect on us – if we remain faithful to God during our times of suffering. Peter brings clarity to this truth in 1 Peter 4:1-2 . . . Therefore, 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, [2] so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.
- F. So how do we fit all this together without getting lost in a few of the hard to understand details?
1. My recommendation is that we acknowledge that the statement about Christ preaching to the spirits now in prison is too obscure to be given a clear, Biblically sound answer. But we can gain several truths from its smaller context that show us more of God's ways.
    - a. First, when we ignore God's warnings (*Noah's preaching*) about coming judgment for sin, we ignore it at our own peril. We may not lose our salvation, but in ignoring God's warnings, we will pay a price that is far greater than anything gained by continuing to do what we have been warned not to do.
    - b. Second, God neither disciplines nor judges without telling us what we are to do and giving us ample warning of what will come (*the flood*) if we do not obey.

2. Which brings us to Peter's second difficult statement which refers to baptism as that which saves us. But saves us from what? After all, we believe are saved by grace through Christ's redeeming death, not by works or any religious activity. So how could baptism save us?
  - a. As you recall, as we have studied I Peter, I have shown you what Paul had to say when Peter and Paul were saying the same or similar things. Peter's words about baptism provide another opportunity to do this, for Paul's teaching on baptism enlarges on Peter's teaching and clarifies how baptism saves us and what it saves us from.
    - (1) It is my intention to talk about all this next Sunday, but in the simplest of terms and from the time of the disciples to at least the late 1500's, baptism was seen as the initiation right into the Christian life and into the church which mystically represented our being saved from the enslaving power of sin and the ongoing practice of sin (*immersed into the water*), and being raised up, as Christ was raised from the dead, to live solely for God in holiness of life.
    - (2) Therefore, sticking with the context, just as the flood waters saved Noah and his family from the destructive practices of sin in the world at that time, so – Peter says – baptism does the same for us. Not the simple act of immersion – as if the water had special properties or some mysterious power, but rather using baptism as a serious request to God to do for you what He did for Christ – which was to put an end to the power of sin and death over Christ, and to raise Christ up to live for God throughout eternity.

### III. Conclusion

- A. I understand that you may be a bit lost in all that has been said today. But in an effort to summarize the intent of Peter in these verses, here is his basic point.
- B. We are called by God to live humbly submissive and respectful lives, especially in the face of mistreatment. This is not easy, even with Christ as our example, for it requires changing from the inside out. However, add in suffering as a powerful transforming factor that has the potential to change us, from the inside out. But what will help us get started on this path? Baptism, for just as the flood waters saved Noah and gave humanity a new start, so the mystical part of baptism gives us a significant boost in leaving the old, sinful life behind and putting on the new life of Christ.