

1 P E T E R

A VERSE BY VERSE STUDY THROUGH PETER'S EPISTLE

SESSION OBJECTIVE: 1 PETER 3:18-22

To understand the proclamation of victory made to fallen angels, and a picture of baptism.

Good News for Bad People

The world is oriented towards a desire for justice. That isn't to say that justice is ever ultimately accomplished, but that people in general want to see bad people pay for their crimes (so long as they aren't the bad ones), and good people rewarded. It's why, "the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing" (1 Cor. 1:18). When punishment is rendered for someone who has done wrong, it seems right. When grace is given, it seems scandalous. In fact, in 1 Corinthians 1:23, the word used to describe "Christ crucified" is the Greek word σκάνδαλον (skandalon), the word from which we get our word *scandalous*. In Greek it means, "stumbling block," and it causes stumbling because of how outrageous it seems. This is the shocking news of Jesus, however: "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" (1 Pet. 3:18). It seems so outrageous that the perfect Son of God would lay His life down for sinners, and yet that is what makes the Gospel so compelling. For people who believe they are already good, it may not mean much, but for those of us who know just how sick we really are, it's truly the best news we could ask for.

Fallen Angels

Verses 19 and 20 present some of the most challenging obstacles for interpretation at first glance, but as will be demonstrated, are actually quite simple to understand. The picture painted is that upon securing salvation for His elect, Jesus proclaimed His victory to fallen angels being kept in some kind of prison. While this may

seem strange, there is actually a significant amount of textual evidence to support this claim. Below is a breakdown of some of the key words and concepts that shape this passage.

THE SPIRITS IN PRISON

The first phrase we must address is, “the spirits in prison.” What does Peter mean by this? This is an example of an obscure text that demands some clarity from other places in Scripture, and there are a few places that suggest a type of spiritual being that is being held in some kind of prison. Jude 6 reads, “And 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.” In this verse, it is Angels that Jude is speaking of, and they are being held in a type of prison setting with, “eternal bonds of darkness.” Additionally, Peter addresses something very similar in 2 Peter 2:4: “For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment.” Again, Peter is speaking of angels, and some kind of violation that landed them in hell, specifically, “pits of darkness.”

With this in mind, the spirits that Peter is speaking of in verse 19 seem to be *angels*. The usage of the term, “spirits,” is not unusual for this application at all, especially considering their fallen status. According to Peter, “they formerly did not obey,” which is consistent with Jude’s suggestion that, “they did not keep their own domain, but abandoned their proper abode,” and with Peter’s additional commentary that, “they sinned.” The question looms: *What sin did they commit? How did they abandon their proper abode?* The next phrase provides a context for this answer.

THE DAYS OF NOAH

These spirits in prison are there because they formerly did not obey, “in the days of Noah.” In order to understand what Peter is doing here, one must go back to Genesis 6 and ask the question: *Are there any angelic figures behaving badly?* As it turns out, there are. Genesis 6 discusses a group called, “the sons of God” (Gen. 6:2). Anytime this phrase is found in Genesis, it always refers to angels. These particular angels engaged in sexual interaction with human women (Gen. 6:2), and the offspring of this unholy union were called *the Nephilim* (Gen. 6:4). The context of Genesis 6 is that the world had become such a dark and dreadfully sinful place that God had determined to wipe it out. In fact, if not for Noah, “a righteous man, blameless in his generation,” the creation narrative might have gone quite differently.

The point, however, is that these angels played a role in the evil state of the world. This explains why Jude said, “they did not keep their own domain, but abandoned their proper abode,” and why Peter later wrote, “they sinned,” and are, “reserved for judgment” (2 Pet. 2:4). They were not intended to leave their heavenly dwelling and cohabitate with humanity, but they defied their bounds and were punished for their transgression by being put in, “eternal bonds of darkness” (Jude 6), and are awaiting their final punishment along with Satan (Rev. 20:7).

A PROCLAMATION

What, then, is Jesus doing? He is not, “going to hell for the sin he took on Himself,” as some false teachers have argued. He is traveling to the domain of hell, not to suffer, but to proclaim His victory over sin and death to those heavenly beings who defied Him and followed Satan (Rev. 12:4). This is coherent with verse 22, which says, “(Jesus), who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with *angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to Him.*” His victory demands angelic subjugation, both by angels in heaven, and fallen angels awaiting their final punishment.

Baptism Saves

The Noah reference is also helpful in trying to understand an equally if not more puzzling phrase. Peter says in 1 Peter 3:21: “Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you.” What does he mean? Some have tried to argue that baptism is the means by which God saves, however this is incongruent with the rest of the New Testament’s commitment that salvation comes by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8-9). The key to understanding this phrase is the phrase, “corresponding to this.” What is Peter linking baptism to? *Noah and the ark*.

Peter has just explained what was happening in the days of Noah, and even described how the ark saved Noah and his family: “In which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water” (1 Pet. 3:20). Consider for a moment the elements in play. God’s judgment is being literally poured out on all of creation because the whole world is guilty, with the exception of Noah, a man God chose to save along with his family. They were elected by God to live. The water of the flood represents God’s judgment against sin, and it is the ark that saved them. They did not avoid the water, but were safely preserved through it because they were in the ark. All of these elements correspond to baptism and in that sense, baptism saves. Why? Let’s make the connection.

THE WATER

The flood waters of judgment against sin are an easy corollary when thinking about baptism. The flood waters are connected to the waters of baptism. It’s a strange connection because usually the waters of baptism are pictured as calm and peaceful, yet Peter links them to judgment against sin.

THE ELECT FAMILY

Who does Noah and his family correspond to? The people of God! We are the, “chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His own possession” (1 Pet. 2:9). Peter said, “According to His great mercy, he has caused us to be born again” (1 Pet. 1:3). In the same way that God chose Noah and his family to preserve, He preserves us through a faith relationship with Jesus.

THE ARK

That brings us to our final corresponding part: the ark. The ark is corresponding to Jesus. We are carried through the waters of judgment and preserved unto life. Paul says we were, “buried with Him in baptism” (Col. 2:12; Rom. 6:4). It is Jesus, our ark, who prevents us from drowning in the judgment of God. Jesus Himself takes on the judgment of God, “for Christ suffered once for sin, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God” (1 Pet. 3:18). We are simply carried through this judgment, but preserved in Him.

Having understood the corresponding parts, it makes sense why Peter makes this statement. In a corresponding manner, baptism saves us just as the ark saved Noah. Baptism pictures this transaction. It’s not that it literally makes us clean, “not as a removal of dirt from the body,” but that it pictures a spiritual reality, “as an appeal to God for a good conscience” (1 Pet. 3:21).

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read 1 Peter 3:18. Who are the righteous and the unrighteous that Peter is speaking about? What does this suffering accomplish?

2. Read 1 Peter 3:19. Where did Jesus go, and what did He do there? (Hint: See above notes)

Day Two

1. Read 1 Peter 3:19, Jude 6, and 2 Peter 2:4. Who are the spirits in prison?

2. Read 1 Peter 3:20. Who did not formerly obey? When was this happening?

Day Three

1. Read Genesis 6:1-7. What angelic disobedience is being described here that corresponds to verse 20?

2. Read 1 Peter 3:21. What does baptism correspond to, and what does it accomplish as a result of that?

Day Four

1. According to the notes, what are the corresponding parts from Noah's account to baptism? Write them down below.

2. Read 1 Peter 3:22. Where has Jesus gone and what is He doing? What has been subjected to Him? How does this correlate with His actions towards the fallen angels in verse 19?

Week 16 Discussion: Baptism Matters

One of the most important decisions a Christian can make is baptism. It's the first act of obedience. Jesus said, "Go, make disciples and baptize them" (Matt. 28:18-20). Baptism was a critical part of faith in the early church, and remains so today. While it does not save you, it is hard to imagine being saved and not being baptized. Jesus said, "Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me" (John 14:21). If you love Jesus, you keep His commandments. He commands us to be baptized. That means, if you love Jesus, you get baptized! Talk as a group about the importance of baptism, and why you should get baptized if you haven't yet.

1. Icebreaker: Have you ever been baptized? If so, when? Describe it. If not, why not?
2. Why do you think people avoid being baptized?
3. How exciting is it when someone is baptized in a worship service? Why?

4. How many times does a Christian need to be baptized? Why?
5. What's the most memorable baptism experience you have, apart from your own. Why?
6. If you have not been baptized and would like to be, spend time in class having your teacher email Pastor Derrick to get it scheduled. Once it's scheduled, notify your class so they can be in attendance to celebrate with you.

Takeaways:

1. Jesus proclaimed His victory over sin and death to fallen angels being held in prison until their final judgment.
2. Baptism, corresponding to the flood, Noah, and the ark, saves you.

PRAYER REQUESTS: