

1Pe 3:18 (NKJV) **For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit,¹⁹ by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison,²⁰ who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while *the* ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water.²¹ There is also an antitype which now saves us--baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him.**

Now, as we get started on the controversial part of these verses, the last phrase of v18 is very important – “**being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit...**”. There is a very intense controversy over this last phrase and the content of what follows through v21. In this portion of v18 there is a contrast between two separate phrases. Some translations use the word “**spirit**” (NASB, ESV, AMP, HCSB, ASV, ISV, RSV, YLT, NRSV), and then some use the word “**Spirit**” (KJV, NKJV, NIV, NLT). In the Greek text the word “*pneuma*” is used for both forms of the word - “**spirit**” and “**Spirit**”. There is no capital letter in the Greek text, so the context is what drives the translation and the meaning. Both of the nouns (**flesh, S/spirit**) are in what is called the dative case. What the dative case does for a noun is to explain for what, for whom, or in whose interest an act is performed. It has many different uses, but the primary ones that impact this translation are called the dative of location - “The man lives **in** a boat” or “The man lives **by** the sea.”. Secondly, there is the dative of sphere - “Believers are **in** Christ or “Believers walk **in** the Spirit. Neither of those are a specific location, but a sphere. Thirdly, there is the dative of agency - “Jesus cast out demons **with** a word” or “He cut the board **with** a saw”. What makes all of this difficult is that the actual Greek text does not define these uses for the reader, so it becomes a matter of how the translator interprets what is happening in the sentence – and that can vary greatly from translator to translator. You have to appreciate that when you come to issues like the one that we are addressing that there are many times when the translators have to actually interpret what they believe is being said.

In our case, the definite article “**the**” is in the Greek text and is used with the word “**flesh**” – i.e., “**the flesh**”. However, it is not used with the word “**spirit**”. The impact of this is that if Peter had been referring specifically to the person of the Holy Spirit, the Greek text would normally have included the article “**the**”, but since it does not include that article, it could easily signify that he was implying that Jesus was made alive in the spiritual realm so that He could accomplish what He was going to do in v19. Now, the difference between those two interpretations is enormous and actually creates two very different meanings. So, the question that we have to answer is how it should be translated. Should it be translated as “**in (the) spirit**” as the NASB and ESV or “**by the Spirit**” as the NKJV and NIV have it. If we chose the first - “**in (the) spirit**”, we would understand the difference to be that even though Jesus’s physical body was dead, He was made alive in the spiritual realm immediately after His death. This would be the dative of sphere, and then after three days, His physical body was united with His spiritual being in a resurrected and eternal body and state by the Holy Spirit. If we chose the second - “**by the Spirit**”, then the passage would be drawing attention to the fact the Holy Spirit was involved in the resurrection and it would be the dative of agency.

Here is what we know. We know that when we see Christ, He will be in His physical body as it was resurrected on the third day. When they placed Him in the grave, He was physically dead, but spiritually alive somewhere, but obviously not in His resurrected body. Where was His body? It was in the tomb where they had laid Him. Joseph of Arimathea had wrapped His body with ointment, spices, perfume, and linens to preserve it and rolled a stone in front of the grave. When the women returned to the tomb on the third day, there was an angel in the tomb and the grave clothes were still there, but His physical body was gone. So, on the third day, His spirit and body were reunited in the resurrection. The simple reality is that even though His body was dead, He was alive in His spirit and in a spiritual dimension that we simply cannot see. However, after He was resurrected and His body united with His spirit, He actually appeared numerous times in His physical body to many different people, and then ascended into heaven in a physical body.

Suffice it to say that the translators and commentaries are almost evenly split on which one of the meanings that this hermeneutical dilemma creates. Most all agree that being “**put to death in the flesh**” is simply referring to His physical death on the cross rather than Him being put to death by the flesh, i.e., by human beings. The idea of being made alive by the **S/spirit**, however, is where the controversy lies. Was He made alive by the Holy Spirit or was He now alive in the spiritual realm immediately when He died? Honestly, it makes no difference because both are true.

Having said that, hermeneutically I believe that it should be translated as “**spirit**”, or that He was now alive in a spiritual state. Obviously He was made alive by the Holy Spirit and He was placed in a spiritual realm by the Holy Spirit that was different than His physical state.. So, why do I take that position? It is because of v19 which is still a part of the sentence, and it says “**by (or through) whom**” (NKJV, NIV) which is also translated as “**by which**” or “**in which**” in most of the other translations (KJV, NASB, ESV, AMP, HCSB, ASV, ISV, RSV, NRSV, YLT). So, the NKJV and the NIV are the only two that translate it as the dative of agency, and all of the others have translated it as the dative of sphere.

“By or through whom”

1Pe 3:19 (NKJV) **by whom** also He went and preached to the spirits in prison,

1Pe 3:19 (NIV) **through whom** also he went and preached to the spirits in prison

“By or in which”

1Pe 3:19 (KJV) **By which** also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison;

1Pe 3:19 (NASB) **in which** also He went and made proclamation to the spirits *now* in prison,

1Pe 3:19 (ESV) **in which** he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison,

1Pe 3:19 (AMP) **In which** He went and preached to the spirits in prison,

1Pe 3:19 (HCSB) **In that state** He also went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison

1Pe 3:19 (ASV) **in which** also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison,

1Pe 3:19 (ISV) **in which state of existence** he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison

I personally think that the ISV translation may be the very best of all of the translations because it is emphasizing that Jesus did not go to the “**spirits in prison**” in a bodily form, but in a spiritual form without His body.

1Pe 3:19 (RSV) **in which he went and preached to the spirits in prison,**

1Pe 3:19 (YLT) **in which also to the spirits in prison having gone he did preach,**

1Pe 3:19 (NRSV) **in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison,**

So, it seems that the consensus of the majority of translations is that it is speaking more of the sphere than the agency.

Now, in either case of how you may interpret this phrase, it would be safe to say that the Holy Spirit did raise His physical body and it would be safe to say that He was eternally alive in the spiritual realm immediately after His physical death. Both are true, and since the actual passage does not provide a kind of irrefutable hermeneutical evidence as to which one is preferred, it seems best to simply accept both as correct because they are. If Christ had not been resurrected, then no one would have known that He was actually alive. All the disciples would have known was that they buried Him in a particular tomb and Christianity would have died a very quick death. So, the resurrection of Jesus’ physical body was God’s way of demonstrating that Jesus was very much alive and had sovereign power over both death and hell – which we will see in the next section of this passage.

The ultimate point and encouragement from this passage for us as believers is really very simple – when we die physically, immediately we will be in a spiritual realm without a physical body. [2 Corinthians 5:8](#) says it this way,

2Co 5:8 (NKJV) **We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord.**

However, eventually and ultimately we will have our physical body resurrected to be united with our spiritual body. Right now, all of our saved loved ones who have died are in a spiritual body only. We do not know exactly what that looks like or how it works, but we do know that after death that there will be a time when both our spirit and body are reunited in a uniquely eternal body often called our resurrection body or our “**spiritual body**”. Speaking of the rapture of the church in [1 Thessalonians 4:13-18](#), Paul says the following,

1Th 4:13 (NKJV) **But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. ¹⁴ For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. ¹⁵ For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive *and* remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive *and* remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. ¹⁸ Therefore comfort one another with these words.**

[1 Corinthians 15:42-44](#) says,

1Co 15:42 (NKJV) So also is the resurrection of the dead. *The body* is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption.⁴³ It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power.⁴⁴ It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body.

For those who have already died, at this moment they only have a spiritual body. However, at the rapture of the church, all of the believers who have died will have their spiritual bodies united with their physical bodies, and will forever have a resurrection body that is completely free of sin, disease, or even being tired. There will be no high cholesterol, no heart attacks, no cancer, no MLS, no fibromyalgia, no allergies, and no hip or knee replacements. When we return with Christ at the Second Coming, we will come with glorified, resurrected bodies and we will live and reign with Christ on the earth for 1000 years in new glorified bodies.

Listen to how it all ends for us as believers in [1 Corinthians 15:51-54](#). This is fabulous and it is our inheritance, so just rejoice in it.

1Co 15:51 (NKJV) Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed--⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.⁵³ For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal *must* put on immortality.⁵⁴ So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: "*Death is swallowed up in victory.*"