

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.

We come now to v19 which says the following,

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

Before we begin this section, it is important to appreciate that there are five prevailing views on the issues which v19-20 are going to raise. I can provide you with all five views initially, but would prefer to go through my analysis and then provide the five views at the end. By me discussing the view that I hold, and have held for many years, I think that it will help you better understand the other views, and you can decide on your own which view you might take. The view that I am going to present to you is generally considered as the majority view, even though some of the details may vary from commentary to commentary.

Now immediately, we have to ask some obvious questions. We have dealt with the issue of “**by whom**” and believe that it is better understood as “**in which state of existence**” that Christ actually “**went and preached to the spirits in prison**”. So, the first question is where did Christ actually go? Where is this “**prison**” located, and to whom is Peter referring when he speaks of “**the spirits**”? Before we start on this, you have to appreciate that there is great controversy and disagreement between the best of scholars on how to view and interpret this passage. This is not a simple issue to resolve.

The first thing that we notice is that Jesus went in a spiritual state to an actual place that was identified as being a “**prison**”. Just the simple word “**went**” means that He travelled from one place to another place. The word “**prison**” is the Greek word “*phulake*”, and in this context is referring to the bottomless pit, or what is called the abyss. It is a prison for demons.¹ There are other verses that refer specifically to this prison. Revelation speaks of it as the “**bottomless pit**” on seven different occasions. For instance, [2 Peter 2:4](#) says,

2Pe 2:4 (NKJV) For if God did not spare the angels who sinned, but cast them down to hell and delivered *them* into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment;

What this verse says is that there are certain wicked angels, but not all of them, that God chose to deliver to “**chains of darkness**” in “**hell**”. The word for “**hell**” is the Greek word “*Tartarus*”. It is described as the deepest abyss of Hades which is that compartment in Sheol assigned to both those that are lost and wicked angels.² At the end of the millennium, all of these demonic angels, along with Satan, will be cast eternally into the lake of fire. This is the only place in the Scriptures that this Greek word “*Tartarus*” is actually used. Because of the term “**chains of darkness**” used in [2 Peter 2:4](#), some commentators

¹ Zodhiates, 1456.

² Zodhiates, 1367.

believe that it is further described as a place characterized by the “**blackness of darkness**” in [2 Peter 2:17](#) and [Jude 13](#) where false teachers will also be sent.

2Pe 2:17 (NKJV) **These are wells without water, clouds carried by a tempest, for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever.**

Jude 1:13 (NKJV) **raging waves of the sea, foaming up their own shame; wandering stars for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever.**

Other verses that speak of this prison mentioned in [1 Peter 3:19](#) are as follows:

Jude 1:6 (NKJV) **And the angels who did not keep their proper domain, but left their own abode, He has reserved in everlasting chains under darkness for the judgment of the great day;**

Rev 9:1 (NKJV) **Then the fifth angel sounded: And I saw a star fallen from heaven to the earth. To him was given the key to the bottomless pit.² And he opened the bottomless pit, and smoke arose out of the pit like the smoke of a great furnace. So the sun and the air were darkened because of the smoke of the pit.**

Rev 11:7 (NKJV) **When they finish their testimony, the beast that ascends out of the bottomless pit will make war against them, overcome them, and kill them.**

Rev 17:8 (NKJV) **The beast that you saw was, and is not, and will ascend out of the bottomless pit and go to perdition. And those who dwell on the earth will marvel, whose names are not written in the Book of Life from the foundation of the world, when they see the beast that was, and is not, and yet is.**

Rev 20:1 (NKJV) **Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand.² He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is *the* Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years;³ and he cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him, so that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished. But after these things he must be released for a little while.**

Rev 20:7 (NKJV) **Now when the thousand years have expired, Satan will be released from his prison**

When He got there, what He did was that He “**preached**”. It is the word “*kerysso*” and it means that He made a proclamation, most likely of His triumph over Satan. The NASB, ESV, and HCSB actually translate it as “**proclamation**” or “**proclaimed**”. Its primary emphasis is not as much on the message, or even the content of the message, but more on the fact that an announcement is being made, a declaration or summons is being made regarding the kingdom of God and its central figure Jesus Christ.³ In the ancient world, men would come into a city to make a public announcement that the victorious generals were coming as part of their celebration for the victories that they had won in battles. Some people believe that what Jesus was doing was proclaiming the gospel to these “**spirits in prison**”, but there is nothing in the word “*kerysso*” that would actually affirm that reality because it is simply a word of proclamation. If Peter wanted to communicate that Jesus actually “proclaimed the gospel” to these demonic angels, then he would have used the Greek word “*euangelizo*” which is the specific Greek verb for preaching the good news, for preaching the gospel. Obviously, there is nothing in the Scriptures that

³ Harris, *kerysso*, ep.

would promote the idea that Christ would give an offer of salvation to a lost person who had already died or to fallen and demonic angels. After lost men die, what awaits them is judgment. [Hebrews 9:27](#) says,

Heb 9:27 (NKJV) And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment,

It appears that what Peter is doing is bearing witness to something, and in this context and because Peter is addressing the impact of His suffering and ultimately His death, it would logically be that Christ was proclaiming to these “**spirits in prison**” of the results of His suffering and death which was an all-encompassing victory over sin, Satan, death, and what we call “hell”. [Revelation 1:18](#) declares this about Christ,

Rev 1:18 (NKJV) I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death.

Another question that has to be answered is who were these “**spirits in prison**”. We are not talking about people, but about “**spirits**”. If Peter had meant people, he would have used the word “**souls**” rather than “**spirits**”. The Greek word for “**spirits**” as used here is “*pneumasin*” and in the New Testament it is never used to speak of people unless it is qualified by a genitive – which it is not in this verse.⁴ A genitive is often identified for us by our use of the preposition “of”. That is the key word in English that identifies the genitive case. For instance, [Romans 8:35](#) says,

Ro 8:35 (NKJV) Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

What the genitive tells us in that verse is that this is the love that Christ has for us and not the love that we have for Christ.⁵ The genitive case in Greek is the same as the English possessive case – God’s law or the law of God.

Everything in verse 19 is in the dative case. You can identify the dative case by the word “to”. I.e., Peter says “**to the spirits in prison**”. So, that is a long way of me telling you that Peter is not addressing people who have physically died, but demonic spirits in Hades awaiting their final judgment. He is clearly addressing spiritual beings who are very distinct from humans.

Just that the phrase “**spirits in prison**” alone would immediately give the impression that because they were “**in prison**” that it was not Old Testament saints who were in “**Paradise**”, or what is called “**Abraham’s bosom**”. Based on what Jesus told the thief on the cross, we know that there is place called “**Paradise**” for those Old Testament believers who died prior to His resurrection. In the Old Testament this is often called “**Sheol**”, but that word is not used in the New Testament. Most believe that Sheol was divided into two compartments – “**Hades**” and “**Paradise**”, and that both of these were temporary holding places. “**Hades**” was a place of torment where all of the lost, as well as demonic angels, were held awaiting their final judgment at the Great White Throne Judgment. [Revelation 20:13-15](#) uses the term “**Hades**” and identifies that the lost will be brought up from it to be finally judged and cast into the lake of fire.

⁴ MacArthur, 209.

⁵ Wallace, 73-74.

Rev 20:13 (NKJV) **The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. ¹⁴ Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. ¹⁵ And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.**

“**Paradise**” (or “**Abraham’s bosom**”) was a place of blessing where the Old Testament saints prior to the resurrection of Christ were waiting until their final resurrection to be with Christ.

Now, I know that this is somewhat of a digression from our passage, but some information is given about Hades in the story of the rich man and Lazarus in [Luke 16:19-31](#),

Lk 16:19 (NKJV) **“There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. ²⁰ But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, ²¹ desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. ²² So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³ And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. ²⁴ Then he cried and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.' ²⁵ But Abraham said, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented. ²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.' ²⁷ Then he said, 'I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father's house, ²⁸ for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.' ²⁹ Abraham said to him, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.' ³⁰ And he said, 'No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' ³¹ But he said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.' ”**

There are some who say that this is simply a parable, but there is nowhere that it is stated that this is a parable, so it appears to be an actual story of the fate of two different individuals prior to the resurrection of Christ. This is a subject for another time, but suffice it to say, that for believers this was not a “**prison**”.

Now, in order to understand to whom these “**spirits**” is referring, we have to also include v20 which says,

1Pe 3:20 (NKJV) **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.**

We learn several things from this verse. First, they were “**disobedient**”, and their disobedience occurred during the “**days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared**”. The word “**disobedient**” is the Greek word “*apeitheo*” and simply means to not believe and therefore to not obey, however, it carries a very strong connotation of simply refusing to be persuaded.⁶ We could actually say that it is a word of defiance. So, whatever these spirits did, it was during the time in which Noah was building the ark. It

⁶ Strong, 970.

would seem logical that because not demonic angels have been cast into this prison that whatever it was that they did must have been as wicked, as vile, and as diabolical as could be imagined. Listen again to how [Jude 6-7](#) describes these angels.

Jude 1:6 (NKJV) And the angels who did not keep their proper domain, but left their own abode, He has reserved in everlasting chains under darkness for the judgment of the great day; ⁷ as Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities around them in a similar manner to these, having given themselves over to sexual immorality and gone after strange flesh, are set forth as an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire.

Whatever these angels did, it involved some kind of godless and gross immorality that went way beyond any boundaries of sensibility – that of going after “**strange flesh**”. The Greek text actually reads that they “**indulged in fornication**” and went after “**different flesh**”. The NASB reads as follows,

Jude 1:7 (NASB) just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them, since they in the same way as these indulged in gross immorality and went after strange flesh, are exhibited as an example in undergoing the punishment of eternal fire.

These angels were indulging in sexual relations with flesh that was different than what was their physical make-up – whatever that was. Now, without missing the point, what this verse is saying is that these particular angels we are addressing left the domain that God had placed them in and they came down and had sexual relations with humans. If you remember in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah that the men of those cities tried to have sexual relations with the angels that had been sent there to rescue Lot and his family.

So, it appears from [1 Peter 3:18-19](#) that this happened in the days of Noah. I.e., the “**spirits in prison**” are the demonic angels who left their abode and had sexual relations with women and had children from that in order to corrupt the human race so that it would become unredeemable – half human, half demonic. All of this is described in [Genesis 6:1-4](#) as follows,

Ge 6:1 (NKJV) Now it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born to them, ² that the sons of God saw the daughters of men, that they *were* beautiful; and they took wives for themselves of all whom they chose. ³ And the LORD said, "My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, for he *is* indeed flesh; yet his days shall be one hundred and twenty years." ⁴ There were giants 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.

Many of the translations use the word “**Nephilim**”, or fallen ones, to describe the “**giants on the earth**” (NASB, ESV, NIV, ASV, RSV, NRSV). There are no other details about how all of this transpired or the form that the fallen angels took in their abandonment of their God defined “**abode**” ([Jude 6](#)). The phrase “**the sons of God**” as used in this passage has traditionally been interpreted to mean fallen angels, demonic beings. When this term is used elsewhere in the Old Testament, it simply refers to angels without reference to whether they are good or bad angels. For me personally, this is the obvious reason why God had to send the flood. Listen to how this is further described in [Genesis 6:5-7](#).

Ge 6:5 (NKJV) **Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.** ⁶ **And the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart.** ⁷ **So the LORD said, "I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast, creeping thing and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them."**

Satan had created a new race of people – have human, half demon, and every intent of their heart was continually evil, perverse, wicked, and ungodly. This is ultimate picture of demon possession that can be found in the Scriptures. There is not another place in the Scriptures that show such an attack on the institution of marriage as this passage does. It is a sin of the most grievous nature when men subvert God's standards for marriage and when they try to genetically alter what man is like. It is demonic. This is most likely the primary reason that God had to actually send the flood and destroy all human life except for Noah and his family. If God had not sent the flood, then it was only a matter of time before the entire human race would have been completely corrupted and perverted and become part human, part demon – an unredeemable race. The Scriptures do not tell us how the demonic angels actually took on a human form or human flesh, but it does say that children were born from these actual marriages. It is almost impossible from the information provided to press the details any further.

There are many who believe that the demons simply “possessed” men as we know they did in the New Testament. So, the idea is that their demonic influence was perhaps genetically bred into the children in some way. That does not seem to answer the issue that they actually left their abode because they personally saw that the women were beautiful to them. John MacArthur seems to hold to the view that the offspring were simply demonized and therefore were still human beings, and targets for divine judgment. He states that “*When God drowned the world 120 years later, they would all perish because they were all ‘flesh’ (Genesis 6:3). They were nothing other than demon-dominated people.*” I do not agree or disagree with MacArthur's position, but personally believe that the [Genesis 6](#) text seems to lean more to actual co-habitation by demons that had taken on a different form than they previously had. I cannot validate that other than by a simple reading of [Genesis 6:1-2](#) which obviously does not provide a great deal of detailed information.

So, in all likelihood, these are the “**spirits**” that were placed in “**prison**”. These are the angels to whom Jesus went to the “**abyss**” and made a proclamation to them of His amazing victory that He had won at the cross. At this point in the narrative, He has yet to be resurrected since it was on the third day that that happened. So, the question that is going to be asked is where is this place, this prison. [Ephesians 4:8-9](#) appears to provide us some answers when it says the following,

Eph 4:8 (NKJV) **Therefore He says: "When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, And gave gifts to men."** ⁹ **(Now this, "He ascended"--what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth?**

From all of the evidence available, the phrase “**the lower parts of the earth**” is referring to what the New Testament calls “**Hades**”, or that holding compartment where the unsaved dead are located, and apparently it is currently somewhere inside the center of the earth. After the Great White Throne Judgment mentioned in [Revelation 20:11](#), [Revelation 20:14-15](#) says the following,

Rev 20:14 (NKJV) **Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.**
¹⁵ And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.

After those events have transpired, then God is going to create a new heavens and a new earth, so there will be no more Hades. [Revelation 21:1](#) says,

Rev 21:1 (NKJV) **Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea.**

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Cole, Steven J. "Lesson 18: A Difficult Passage Explained and Applied (1 Peter 3:18-22)." *Bible.org*. August 2, 2013. <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-18-difficult-passage-explained-and-applied-1-peter-318-22>.
- Harris, Ralph. W., ed. *The Complete Biblical Library: Greek English Dictionary*. Springfield, Missouri: World Library Press Inc., n.d.
- MacArthur, John. *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 1 Peter*. Chicago, Illinois: Moody Publishers, 2004.
- Strong, James. *The New Strong's Expanded Dictionary of Bible Words*. Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001.
- Wallace, Daniel B. *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1996.
- Zodhiates, Spiros. *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*. Revised Edition, 1993. Chattanooga, Tennessee: AMG Publishers, 1992.