

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Spirits in Prison: Who? When? How?

For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison; Which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water. The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ: Who is gone into heaven, and is on the right hand of God; angels and authorities and powers being made subject unto him. (1 Peter 3:18–22, KJV 1900)

If you were looking for a passage that has been most subjected to speculation more than to Biblical study and proper interpretation, this lesson would reside near the top of the list. I have read or heard appeals to mythology and any number of other bizarre explanations of the passage more often than contextual and Biblical explanations. Since when does Biblical hermeneutics, the study and interpretation of Scripture, rely on myths? A wise attitude toward Scripture is that Scripture is the best resource to consult for our interpretation of Scripture.

What can we learn about these questions from the passage itself? Let's examine the text.

1. ***These spirits were sometimes disobedient.*** Peter doesn't tell us how, but he tells us that they were disobedient. Do we need to ask; they were disobedient to God.
2. ***Jesus went to them and preached to them during the time when they were "...in prison."*** The mythological interpretation that most often appears is that He preached to them during the three days and nights that His body was in the tomb. Peter indeed tells us that Jesus died and that He arose by the Spirit, but he doesn't indicate that the period of His death defines the time of His going to those imprisoned spirits and preaching to them. If we examine other passages regarding Jesus' death and resurrection, particularly Hebrews, we discover that this three day period was quite focused on His appearing before the Father as our Great High Priest, fulfilling the Levitical (And Melchisedec) role of priest on behalf of the people for whom He died. This Biblical truth leaves no time for Him to also go to a mythical—and factually, non-existent—temporary place where the spirits of those who have died supposedly reside till the final resurrection. In fact, Jesus told the thief "...Today shalt thou be

with me in paradise." (Luke 23:43) Jesus didn't so much as hint that the thief—or He—would go to any place apart from where God resides. The word "Paradise" only appears two other times in the New Testament, 2 Corinthians 12:4 where Paul specifically defines it as "...the third heaven," not as a mythological place for departed spirits, and Revelation 2:7, where Jesus tells the Ephesian Church that the tree of life resides in this "paradise." In 2 Corinthians 5:1-8, Paul tells us that our death is instantly followed by our being in a "...house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens," as well as that, in that "house," we shall be "...present with the Lord." Thus, the Biblical indicators for this word "Paradise" direct us to heaven where Jesus in His resurrected and glorified body now resides with the Father and the spirits of the redeemed who have died. So Scripture eliminates a mythological place of the departed dead separate from God and, along with it, the related interpretation of this passage.

3. ***Their disobedience occurred during Noah's lifetime;*** specifically during the time that Noah was building the ark. We might--and should--reasonably conclude that Jesus preached to them during that same era. Although God's longsuffering waited, in some way Jesus preached to them. "And spared not the old world, but saved Noah the eighth person, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood upon the world of the ungodly." (2 Peter 2:5) Peter, the same man whom the Holy Spirit directed to write our study passage, refers to Noah as a preacher of righteousness. When Paul described himself as an ambassador for Christ, he described that position, "...as though God did beseech you by us." (2 Corinthians 5:20) To interpret that Jesus preached to the spirits in prison

through Noah during the time that Noah built the ark is altogether in harmony with Paul's description of godly preaching. When a man faithfully preaches the word, God adds His approving stamp to the words and commands those who hear to accept the words as His. Do not use this point to put a preacher on a pedestal. When a man preaches error, God holds the man in judgment for his error and commands those who hear to reject the words. (1 Corinthians 11:1) Most often the Lord sends His message to churches, and to individual believers, through the man whom He has sent to serve as their pastor.

In our era of everything-internet, it is not unusual for people to download sermons from men all over the country, and listen to them as if God sent the message directly to them. Perhaps, if the words preached are true, God indeed sent the message to the church that man serves as pastor, but not at all necessarily to every person who happens to hear those words. When I visit a church whose pastor I do not know well, I will usually tell the church that, if I preach something that contradicts the teachings of their pastor, they should promptly discard what I preach and listen to their pastor.

Sadly, we live in a time when unscrupulous teachers of error use the internet and other modern communication tools to spread their error far and wide, quite often indirectly suggesting that those who hear ignore their local pastor and heed the message of error. My advice is simple.

Take advantage of the internet, but use it wisely. Never download or listen to a sermon by a man whom your pastor will not invite to preach in your church. If in doubt, ask your pastor, and follow his counsel.

When people routinely listen to preaching from various men, they often do not notice contradictory teachings, so they try to believe what their pastor and the other man preaches, and the inevitable outcome is hopeless confusion.

4. **Few people were saved in Noah's time by the ark.**

If we accept the various birth and death ages from Adam to the flood, we will compute a time lapse of around 1656 years. How many people might have populated the earth at the time of the flood?

However we calculate our estimate, that number will be quite large when compared to the number of people who were saved in the ark. Only eight people were saved in the ark; Noah, his wife, his three sons, and their wives.

In last week's study, we examined the distinction between eternal salvation and time salvation, a

study that contrasts eternal salvation with present discipleship. Among many other factors that clearly distinguish the two deliverances, the number of people involved stands out. Where ever we see Scripture address the number of those who shall enjoy eternity with God in heaven, the number is consistently framed as a large number. In the seventh chapter of Revelation, after going into some detail to identify a finite and carefully numbered people, one hundred forty-four thousand, John immediately looks from this world and tribes of people into heaven. We could easily and rightly assign the title to this section of Scripture, "Heaven's Population."

After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands.
(Revelation 7:9; emphasis added)

The number of people whom God chose in Christ before He created our material universe was and is a "great multitude." There is no way to assign a specific value to this number, but the typical attempts by theologians who involve human contributions to God's eternal salvation always describe the number as quite small. In fact, if we interpret the salvation of which Peter here writes as being eternal salvation, and if we accept that water baptism is essential for that salvation, our calculations will result in less than one percent of humanity enjoying eternity with God. Those who confuse God's election and grace in eternal salvation with discipleship, or "Conditional time salvation,"¹ clearly contradict this passage and

¹ "Conditional time salvation" is one of several historical terms used to distinguish Biblical discipleship that is, according to Scripture, in some way conditional on the believer's active faith and obedience, from God's election and eternal salvation that is wholly unconditional on the part of the believer. Confusion in distinguishing these two Biblical truths can only be avoided by understanding the difference between eternal salvation and discipleship. Conditionality (On the part of the believer) is an essential ingredient of discipleship, and no conditions whatever (Again, on the part of the believer) is an essential Biblical feature of eternal salvation, sometimes overly simplified by reference to the new birth. The measure of human experience—in this case the new birth—is not an acceptable basis on which to interpret Biblical doctrine, especially one so central to Biblical truth as eternal salvation. When people do not distinguish these two Bible doctrines, the confusion of mind that follows will fall into one of two traps: 1) Arminianism, salvation by works when the conditions of discipleship are applied to the new birth and eternal salvation, or 2) Fatalism when the

many others. In fact, they consistently confuse God's election, concluding in eternal salvation, with discipleship. Scripture is just as consistent in telling us that the number of faithful disciples shall be small as in revealing that the number of God's elect who shall sing His redemption hymn in heaven is quite large. We could use numbers alone to imply that Peter's lesson relates to discipleship, but he does not leave us with such an indirect method of understanding what he intended to teach. His use of the present tense verb, "...doth also now save us," makes the point. Peter further emphasizes the point by his inclusion of "...not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God."

Rather than establishing grounds for belief in mythology and its claim of an isolated, underground place for the spirits of those who have died, Peter's teaching in this lesson richly instructs us in the beneficial truths of godly, present, active discipleship. Our "...now salvation" that results from a firm belief in the Lord Jesus Christ and Biblical baptism in water doesn't wash away the guilt of our sins, but it does answer the questions of the good conscience toward God. We shall never find all the answers to all of our questions in this world, but Scripture teaches us to look for as many answers as we can find—in Scripture. Peter here gives us one such answer.

From both a Biblical and an experiential perspective, I can tell you that baptism, Biblical,

no-human-conditions of the new birth and eternal salvation are applied to discipleship. Occasionally the confused mind will fall into a third errant belief, a muddled mixture of the first two. Andrew Fuller tried to make sense of this mix, but his efforts failed to harmonize with Scripture. When people try to mix these two errors, they cannot possibly arrive at truth. Belief of the truth leads to broader understanding and deeper belief. Errant belief never leads to truth; it only leads to greater error and confusion. Occasionally today people who follow the Fuller theme will boastfully describe themselves as "Cal-Minian," part Calvinist and part Arminian. Ask the people from the Synod of Dort if such a belief is consistently possible in light of Biblical teaching. More to the point, read your Bible to see how well grace and human works cooperate to accomplish eternal salvation. Scripture consistently distinguishes eternal salvation from discipleship. The two commonly used terms, "Time salvation" and "Eternal salvation" are sufficiently equal to Biblical terms that they accurately distinguish the two Biblical truths. "Eternal salvation" is a Bible term (Hebrews 5:9), and Peter's "...doth also **now save** us" is a near-equivalent to "Time salvation." "Now" is an adverb of time; it refers to the present moment of time, just as the term "Time salvation" does. If someone objects to this term, they cannot object to "Now salvation" as a non-Biblical term.

faith-in-the-Lord-Jesus-Christ-and-His-death-and-resurrection baptism, forms the Biblical basis for a quality of spiritual contentedness and peace that cannot be fully described apart from the experience. I well recall many years ago baptizing a man in his seventies who had heard Biblical preaching for most of his life, though he had never been baptized until that late age. As he looked at me just moments after I baptized him, he smiled and said, "Brother Joe, if I had known this peace would come with baptism, I'd have been baptized many years ago." Do you want that peace in your life? Baptism is not a magical trick to give it to you, but godly faith in the Person and work of your Savior, followed by baptism, takes you by the hand and points the way to it. It answers your good conscience's question with joyful peace.

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor