

A Study of The Epistle of 1st Peter

Theme: “A LIVING HOPE!”

Trinity Lutheran Church - Norman, OK.

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Lesson: 25

Chapter 3:20-22

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BIBLE TEXT:

the spirits in prison, (20) because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. (21) Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, (22) who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

STUDY NOTES:

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(20) because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water.

(Gen 6:3-14; 7: 1,7,23; 8:18; Rom 2:4; Eph 4:8-10; Heb 7:27; 9:26-28; 10:12; 11:7)

(21) Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience,

(Ac 16:33; 22:16; 23:1; Rom 6:3-6; 10:10; Eph 5:25-27; Titus 3:5; Heb 10:22)

through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, (22) who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

(Ps 8:1,6; 93:1-4; 110:1; Zech 9:10;

Mt 28:18; Mk 16:16-19; Lk 24:50-53; Ac 1: 9-11; 2:33-34;

Rom 8:34-38; Eph 1:20,21; 4:10; 6:12; Col 3:1; Heb 1:3; 4:14; 12:2)

Luther's Works – Volume 30 pp. 113-115

“This is a strange text and certainly a more obscure passage than any other passage in the New Testament. I still do not know for sure what the apostle means. At first the words give the impression that **Christ** preached to the spirits, that is, to the souls who did not believe many years ago, when Noah was building the ark. I do not understand this. Nor can I explain it. Nor has anyone ever explained it. But if anyone chooses to maintain that after **Christ** had died on the cross, He descended to the souls and preached to them there, I will not stand in the way. These words could give such a meaning.

But I do not know whether St. Peter wants to say this. On the other hand, these words could also be understood to mean that after **the Lord Christ** had ascended into heaven, He came in the spirit and preached, yet in such a way that His preaching was not physical. For He does not speak with a physical voice and no longer performs the natural functions of the body. Therefore if this meaning, which the words seem to express,

is correct, namely, that He preached to the spirits in His spiritual life, such preaching must also be a spiritual preaching which He does inwardly in the heart and in the soul, so that it is not necessary for Him to go with the body and preach orally. The text does not state that He descended to the souls and preached to them when He died; for it reads “in which,” that is, when He was put to death according to the flesh and was made alive according to the spirit, namely, when He divested Himself of His existence in the flesh and of the natural functions of the body and entered into a spiritual existence and life such as He now has in heaven. Then He went and preached. Now He did not descend again into hell after He had assumed such a new existence. Therefore one must understand these words to mean that He did this after His resurrection.

Since these words tend to force one to conclude that spiritual preaching is spoken of, we shall cling to the opinion that St. Peter is speaking of **the office which Christ** administers through external preaching. For He commanded the apostles to preach **the Gospel** physically. But in addition to the preaching, He Himself comes, is spiritually present, and speaks and preaches to the hearts of the people, just as the apostles address their words orally and physically to the ears of the people. Then **Christ** preaches to the spirits who are in captivity in the prison of the devil. Thus the going, like the preaching, should be understood in a spiritual sense.

But the words that follow—“to the spirits in prison, who formerly did not believe”—we choose to interpret in accordance with the divine computation of time, namely, that in the existence in which **Christ** is, those who lived in the past and those who are living today are alike before Him. For His rule extends over both the dead and the living. And in that life the beginning, the middle, and the end of the world are all in one lump. But here in the world, of course, there is one way of measuring. Here time is consecutive, the son after the father, etc.

Let me give an illustration. If a piece of wood is lying some distance away from you, or if you are looking at it lengthwise, then you cannot examine it well; but if it is lying close to you, or if you are standing on top of it and can look at it crosswise, then you have a full view of it. Thus we on earth cannot understand this life; for it is always moving along consecutively, step by step until the Last Day. But before **God** everything takes place in one moment. For before Him a thousand years are as one day, as St. Peter says in his second epistle (2 Peter 3:8; cf. Ps. 90:4). Thus for Him the first human being is just as close as the human being who is to be born last. And He sees everything at one time, just as the human eye can bring together in one moment two things that are far from each other. Therefore here the meaning would be that **Christ** no longer preaches physically but is present with the Word and preaches to the spirits in their hearts. But do not understand this to mean that He preaches this way to all spirits.

But to which spirits did He preach? To those “who formerly did not believe.” This is the figure of speech which is called synecdoche, *ex parte totum*, “the whole from a part,” that is, not to those very same spirits but to those who are like them and are just as unbelieving as those. Thus one must look from this life into that life.

Now in my opinion this is the best interpretation of these words of St. Peter. Yet I will not fight too hard for it. But I surely cannot believe that **Christ** descended to the souls and preached to them there. Scripture, too, is against this and states that everyone, when he comes to that place, will receive as he believed and lived. Moreover, since it is not certain what the condition of the dead is, we surely cannot apply this verse to them.

But it is certain that **Christ** is present and preaches to the hearts wherever a preacher proclaims **the Word of God** to the ear. Therefore we can adopt this interpretation without danger. But let him to whom a better interpretation is revealed follow it. This is now the sum and substance of the interpretation I have pointed out: **Christ** ascended into heaven and preached to the spirits, that is, to human souls, and among these souls there were unbelievers in the days of Noah.”

LIFE APPLICATION

Since Christ rose from the dead, descended into hell and ascended into heaven how is he now present among us here on earth?