

1 Peter 3:18-22 (Alfred Henry Burton) 53184

Christian Truth: Volume 2, Saved by Water: Preaching to the Spirits in Prison (3:18-22)

(Read 1 Pet. 3:18-22)

There are two great delusions of the present day against which we wish to put all our readers on their guard. The first is, that salvation may be obtained on the other side of death; and the second is, that people can be saved by an outward ordinance such as baptism.

At first sight the well-known passage of 1 Pet. 3:18.22 seems to give some ground for both these thoughts, so that it becomes necessary that we should have a clear and God-given understanding of these verses.

It is important to observe at the outset of our inquiry that it is nowhere said that Christ went to the prison and preached there. This passage gives not a shred of support to the doctrine of purgatory, nor to the modern idea of universal salvation after death for those who have died in their sins and their unbelief.

Verse 18 states the ground of salvation for any who will bow to the truth of the gospel—Christ has suffered for sins. He who knew no sin, He in whom was no sin, and He who did no sin, has taken the sinner's place, borne the sinner's judgment at the hand of a holy God, and suffered for the sinner's sins. This He has done once for all. So perfect was His sacrifice, so infinite in the sight of God the value of His most precious blood, so all-sufficient His atoning sufferings, that the work needs no repetition—"Christ also bath once suffered for sins."

Moreover, He, the just One, has suffered for those who did not deserve such love; He suffered for the unjust.

"Jesus was crucified, A thief on either side, For the unjust He died, Oh wondrous love!"

He upon whom death had no claim was put to death as to His life in the flesh, but, glorious fact! He is alive again; He has been quickened by the power of the Spirit. He has come out from death; He is risen; He is alive again.

But though risen, He was not corporeally present with these few believers from among the Jewish

nation. These believers to whom Peter wrote were continually being taunted by their former coreligionists; they said they believed in Christ, but where was He? He was nowhere to be seen. That might be, the believer could reply, but though not corporeally present, by faith we see Him; He has been quickened by the Spirit, and by that same Spirit He went (though not corporeally present to the people of Noah's day) and preached to those now in prison.

Unquestionably the change of subject is here abrupt, and the language somewhat obscure; all the more reason why there should be a careful weighing of the inspired words, and not a hasty conclusion drawn therefrom, at variance with the whole tenor and teaching of Scripture elsewhere.

"Quickened by the Spirit," then Christ had been, "by which [or, in virtue of which] also He went and preached," etc. Mark, it does not here say that "Christ went and preached"—this might indeed have created a difficulty, though no more so than a similar statement in Eph. 2:17. Who that reads this latter passage understands it in any other sense than that since the cross and ascension Christ preaches to both

Gentiles and Jews, not in personal presence but by the Spirit? The Spirit it is who brings home in power to the soul the testimony of Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension, and believing this, peace takes the place of enmity.

The passage in Peter is guarded still more carefully, even as God has foreseen the evil use that Satan might make of the words. In virtue of that same Spirit that quickened Christ from the dead, did He go and preach to the spirits which are now in prison. And why are they in prison? They are in prison because of their disobedience to the preaching of Noah. Noah was a preacher of righteousness (2 Pet. 2:5), and he patiently and perseveringly sounded forth the testimony of God, but his words fell on deaf ears and stubborn hearts; they were disobedient. The Spirit, the Spirit of Christ (1 Pet. 1:11) in Noah, strove, but they resisted; the long-suffering of God waited, but they slighted every appeal.

Three things must be observed: (1) in the past as living men on earth they were disobedient; (2) in the present their spirits are in prison, there awaiting (3) in the future the judgment of the great day (compare 2 Pet. 2:1.9

and Jude 6). A testimony of an exceptional character they had been privileged to hear but, this being despised, a judgment of an exceptional character overtook them in this world; that is, the flood. But though a judgment overtook them then, they are awaiting the great judgment day to come, "As it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment." Heb. 9:27. The judgment that swept their bodies away in the flood was, we might say, a judgment before death; but the judgment after death is that for which these spirits in prison are reserved, along with all who die in their sins—terrible thought! to stand before the Great White Throne (Rev. 20:11).

This passage in Peter then does not refer to all who have died in their sins, but only to a class that had been specially favored by the long continued and faithful preaching of Noah (Gen. 6:3). It would be strange indeed if they who had been so specially favored during life should be singled out for an additional testimony after death. When rightly understood, not a shred of evidence is here afforded for the doctrine, whether of ancients or moderns, that Christ descended to hades, there to preach to the spirits in prison.

But further, there are those who imagine that baptism can save. It is ever Satan's effort to turn the heart away from Christ; and ordinances, however important in their proper place, are not Christ. Faith in Christ is the only means of life to the soul, as Scripture abundantly testifies (see John's Gospel and Epistles). Baptism never gives life, nor indeed is it a figure of life, but of death (see Rom. 6:3, 4). But let us turn to the passage before us in Peter.

The subject in hand has been the days of Noah, the flood, and the only means of escaping the judgment; namely, the ark. The unbelieving Jews in the early days of Christianity were constantly taunting the believers because they were so few in number, but this was no ground to reject the truth that Christians believed, for was it not so in the days of Noah? Did not the flood sweep away the mass of mankind, and was it not a few only that were saved? The judgment had been long foretold, and a way of escape had been provided. The waters of the flood were waters of death and judgment; the ark was an ark of salvation; those who, in obedience

to the Spirit's testimony through Noah, entered the ark were saved; they were "saved [not by, but] through [the] water." The ark was a figure of that which saves the soul; it was a figure of Christ and of His death which alone can save from the righteous judgment of God.

In like manner (v. 21) baptism, which was the introductory and initiatory ordinance of Christianity, is a figure of that which saves us. Baptism does not save us, but it is a figure of that which does. The waters of the flood were a figure of death. Baptism also is a figure of death—not so much the death of the believer as the death of Christ Himself. "Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into His death?" Rom. 6:3.

But the death of Christ would avail nothing apart from His resurrection; consequently it is said, "The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us... 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."

Now notice the parenthesis in verse 21; it should read thus: "Not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the demand [not answer] of a good conscience toward God." When once the conscience has been awakened by the Spirit of God, nothing will really satisfy it but a perfect acceptance, and a perfect peace; it demands nothing less, for it has to do with God. A good conscience toward God implies a perfect standing according to divine righteousness, and this can only be found in Christ, dead, risen, and glorified. Now this truth is set forth by baptism which signifies not merely the washing away of the filth of the flesh, but the introduction into all the full results of Christ's work.

We are not saved by water, as though the ordinance of baptism could save us. No, but just as the ark of old saved Noah and his household "through [the] water" and in this sense is a type of Christ who saves His people from judgment by dying for them; so baptism is a figure of that which meets the need of the awakened conscience.

All glory to His name! Christ is the only Savior, and His death and resurrection the firm foundation for peace with God.

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