



Could you shed some light on 1 Peter 3:18-20?

QUESTION OF THE MONTH

Q: Could you shed some light on 1 Peter 3:18-20?

A: I'll try. Bible scholars are nearly unanimous in saying that this is THE most "difficult" and "obscure" passage in all of Scripture!

First, let me state a general principle: You never let your interpretation of a "difficult" or "obscure" passage overturn your correct interpretation of a clear and obvious teaching that goes all through the Bible!

So, before we even start, I'm going to state that this passage will NOT teach us that dead people are actually alive, or that Jesus did any traveling during the days that He was lying in Joseph's tomb, or that it is possible for people's "spirits" to respond to "messages" that are preached to them after the people themselves are dead. Such teachings would contradict hundreds of clear and obvious texts all over the Bible; therefore, they CANNOT be the correct interpretations of this passage.

1 Peter 3:18 starts by stating that Christ "once suffered for sins" — a clear reference to His death on the Cross of Calvary. It goes on to say that He was "put to death in the flesh." I think that the phrase "IN the flesh" might better be paraphrased as "BY human beings." Jesus was put to death (on the Cross) by Roman soldiers. However ("but"), He was (three days later) "quicken" (made alive) "BY the Spirit" (the Holy Spirit — the Spirit of God). 1 Peter 3:18 clearly agrees with the basic confession of Christian faith as given by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, Romans 10:9 and many other verses.

1 Peter 3:19 continues (and expands) this thought by stating, "By" (that is, "by means of" — I think that this might better be paraphrased as "acting through") "which" (the Spirit of God) ALSO (at another time, and in another place, IN ADDITION TO the time and place referred to in verse 18), "he" (God — the last

person mentioned before the word “he”) “went and preached unto the spirits in prison.” WHEN did this “preaching trip” take place, and WHO was preached to? I think that the answers to these questions are presented in verse 20. The “spirits” are NOW “in prison,” but they weren’t “in prison” when the “preaching trip” took place.

1 Peter 3:20 explains, “Which” (the “spirits”) “sometime” (a long time ago) “were disobedient” (to God). When were any “spirits” ever “disobedient to God”? I think that the answer to that question is found in 2 Peter 2:4 and Jude 6, in both of which verses there is a reference to “angels” who “sinned” (2 Peter 2:4) – or who “kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation” (Jude 6), and I think that both of these verses are referring to the account in Genesis 6:1-4. The Spirit of God “preached unto” (actually, proclaimed a message of judgment against) these “angels” THROUGH the message that was literally preached by Noah (who, according to 2 Peter 2:5, was “a preacher of righteousness”) acting under the Spirit’s guidance. Literally, Noah would have been preaching TO the people (human beings) of his time, but he was preaching ABOUT the wickedness of the fallen angels and proclaiming a message of judgment against them. 2 Peter 2:4 explains the “prison” by mentioning that those angels were “cast down to hell” (literally, “Tartarus”) and “delivered into chains of darkness” (Jude 6 also mentions that they are “reserved in everlasting chains” in “darkness”).

1 Peter 3:20 makes it quite clear (in my opinion) that all of this took place during the 120 years just before the Flood, NOT during the 3 days that Jesus was lying in Joseph’s tomb. Look at the phrases “when once the longsuffering of God waited,” “in the days of Noah,” and “while the ark was a-preparing.” I don’t see how any other conclusion (to that question) is possible.

Source: [Afterlife](#)