

What Does Scripture Mean, Jesus Preached to the Spirits in Prison?

(An Exposition of 1st Peter 3:18)

by Tony Warren



One of the most puzzling questions for a lot of Christians is how we are to understand 1st Peter 3:18. It is there that we read, it was by Christ's death and resurrection that He went and preached unto the spirits in prison. The question is, how did Jesus preach to the spirits in prison?

There are many who theorize that this passages speak of a type of purgatory, the spiritual under-world or intermediate place of the imprisoned lost. However, these theories are contrary to all that the Holy Canon declares about sin, judgment and our mortality. The Bible is perfectly clear that whatever spiritual condition a person dies in (*whether saved or unsaved*), that is the condition in which he will stand before God and be judged. There is no possibility for a second chance at redemption after death. So all of the many variations of this doctrine are decidedly unbiblical.

Ezekiel 18:4

- "Behold, all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine: *the soul that sinneth, it shall die.*"

Romans 6:23

- "*For the wages of sin is death..*"

Hebrews 9:27

- "And as it is appointed unto men *once to die, but after this the judgment:*"

Once a person leaves this earth in death, his chance for redemption is over. There is no remembrance of him in the grave, and on the last day ([John 12:48](#)) when he is raised up to be paid according to what he has done while he was in this world. There

is no Spirit of Christ preaching to any unsaved person after physical death, for death is appointed to every single one of us, and after that the judgment ([Hebrews 9:27](#)) of God. By the same token, when we receive salvation in this world through the work of Christ, we are no longer under judgment to be condemned for sin and are judged as perfect before God. There is nothing in the Holy Scriptures that would even imply that there is a second chance at salvation after death. This divine truth is also made abundantly clear in the parable of Lazarus. Christ explains this parable saying there is a great gulf fixed ([Luke 16:26](#)) where it is impossible for the redeemed to pass from one side to the side of the unsaved who died, or those who died unsaved to pass over to the side of the redeemed. Thus if anyone dies unsaved, that is the condition that they will remain in.

So then, what does the Scriptures teach on *how did Jesus preach to the spirits in prison*? In this brief essay on the question, we will take a look at this verse of 1st Peter in the light of Scripture, and let the Holy Spirit of God reveal His truth to us. In all honesty, only the Word of God can interpret the Word of God ([Genesis 40:8](#)) since it is the only infallible authority. No man can privately interpret God's Word, and so we must surrender to what His Word says in order to receive an answer ([Genesis 41:16](#)) concerning understanding.

1st Peter 3:18-20

- "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 made alive by the Spirit:
- *by which* also He went and preached unto the saints in prison;
- which sometimes 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."

How did Jesus preach to the spirits in prison? These can be difficult passages, but we can begin to understand what it actually means if we follow carefully what it actually says with no preconceived ideas about the interpretation and "*in the light of the rest of the Bible.*" Because the Bible was not written in a vacuum, nor was it subject to any personal opinions or private interpretation of the saints of old. Thus it is not subject to our private interpretation or personal opinions today. Our interpretation and opinion should be subject to it, because every Word is divinely inspired.

2nd Peter 1:20-21

- "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the Scripture is of any private interpretation.
- "For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost."

If every Word of the Bible is inspired of God, then it is systemic and cannot be subject to man's personal guesses, theories, will or imaginative thesis. Faithful saints are those who search the Scriptures ([Proverbs 25:2](#)) and are Spirit led by God's Word, not those who arbitrarily attempt to lead it according to their own will. Only through

the Holy Spirit, by our circumspect comparing of (*and study in*) Scriptures, will we ever come to the true understanding of what the Scriptures truly mean.

When I am asked, "*How did Christ preach to the spirits in prison,*" the obvious answer seems to me to be "*exactly as the passage itself declares.*" That, by being put to death in the flesh, but quickened or made alive by the Spirit, Christ was a witness to spirits in prison that were disobedient. In other words, it is declaring that it was by Christ's death in the flesh and resurrection by the Spirit, that He sent His Messenger (Spirit of truth) to testify to the disobedient and set the captive spirits free. It is a Biblical fact that before we were saved, we were spirits held captive or prisoner by Satan. Christ was manifested in the flesh specifically to set us free from that captivity. With these humble beginnings, it is now a matter of simply defining what we read "*by biblical terms,*" rather than by speculation, tradition or assumptions.

Let us go about this systematically, as honorable kings ([Proverbs 25:2](#)) who search the Scriptures, comparing them diligently in order to find out exactly what the spirits in prison are. Considering what is written, how could it be that *by Christ's death and resurrection*, these spirits had the gospel preached (declared) to them? We cannot simply presuppose or guess at it, we have to search ([John 5:39](#)), study ([2nd Timothy 2:15](#)), and compare Scripture with Scripture ([1st Corinthians 2:13](#)) and receive it as His interpretation ([1st Corinthians 3:16-17](#)) rather than our own. If we do not stray from the fundamentals, we find that the answer is actually quite self evident. The spirits in prison are all of the unsaved for whom Christ died. This is totally in harmony with the context of these verses. God uses the word prison (*as we shall see*) to signify Satan holding the spirits of the elect captive before they are set free. Thus, those spirits are whom Christ came to preach deliverance. How did Christ preach to the spirits in prison? It was by the witness of His Spirit through His gospel that set them free. We were the spirits that were in prison, just as the spirits who are not set free remain in spiritual captivity today:

1st John 4:1

- "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they be of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world."

In Biblical terms, what are these spirits that the saints are told not to believe? Clearly they are the *spirits in prison*. In other words, they are those people who are held in spiritual captivity so that they are in bondage and servitude to Satan. They are people who are unsaved whom the saints are not to believe. The question we should be asking concerning the actual text of Peter is, How does Christ preach or declare the gospel to someone *by* His death and resurrection? Is it not through the witness of His Spirit? And is that not exactly what 1st Peter says in the text? The death He suffered was on the cross, and the punishment He endured was the wrath of God as He was laden with our sins ([2nd Corinthians 5:21](#)). The wages He paid was that which was due for our sins. Thus when Christ was resurrected, He was raised up without those sins. This act of sacrifice is what set our spirits free. In the real sense, as the second man (*the second Adam*) wherein we were dead, we were resurrected with him and delivered from our prison house. These spirits that were in prison, and that were

witnessed the gospel through His Spirit, are the election.

Acts 2:31

- "He seeing this before spake of the **Resurrection of Christ**, that His soul was Not Left In Hell, neither His flesh did see corruption."

This is the 1st Resurrection that the saints have part in that assures they will never die. It is because Christ has preeminence as the first raised, that we are raised up in Him a new creation, spirits set free from the prison house of spiritual bondage.

Colossians 2:12

- "Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him *through the faith of the operation of God*, who hath raised him from the dead."

Romans 8:9-11

- "But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his.
- And if Christ be in you, the body is dead because of sin; but the Spirit is life because of righteousness.
- But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you."

It is Christ's Spirit that dwells within us (*because of His death*) that declared spiritual deliverance to the elect, that they are no more disobedient and servants of sin. This is what 1st Peter means by declaring that Christ suffering for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened (*made alive*) by the Spirit, *by which* also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison. This is the understanding of this verse. The Greek words that are translated "by which" are [*en*] [*hos*], meaning "in which" He preached or declared the gospel. We received the testimony of Christ of His resurrection through His Spirit. Without His death and Resurrection, He could bring no preaching of the gospel to the spirits in prison. He had to die and ascended to the kingdom so that His Spirit could witness deliverance to the saints.

John 15:26

- "But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, *he shall testify of me:*"

John 16:7

- "Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for *if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you*; but if I depart, I will send him unto you."

If Christ die and was resurrected, then His Spirit could come to the elect and testify

or preach to the spirits in prison of this deliverance. The death that Christ suffered on the cross was more than simply physical death. It was more than simply laying in a tomb for three days. That is what many do not really fully comprehend. Any man can die for his God, but there was a real work and accomplishment of Christ in His death and resurrection. Through it He overcame the power of Satan, spoiled (*took by conquest*) his possessions ([Luke 11:21-22](#)), which were those who were in bondage to serve him, and He set those spirits free. He spoiled Satan's kingdom, and by His Spirit testified to the spirits that he had held. That is what the passages of 1st Peter chapter 3 refers to. The specific work and accomplishment of Christ by His suffering, death, and being raised again for our sins.

1st Peter 3:18-20

- "For Christ also hath once **Suffered for Sins**, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us unto God, being put to **Death** in the FLESH, but quickened (*made alive*) in the Spirit.
- ***By Which*** He went and preached unto the spirits in prison;"

By this death and resurrection we were also risen, made alive in the spirit. It was in this Spirit that Christ testified to the spirits, and by which He draws the elect to obedience. The key words in that verse are, "*by which*." Even as He was made sin ([2nd Corinthians 5:21](#)) for us, that by His death in the flesh and being made alive in the Spirit, the gospel or good news is proclaimed to our imprisoned disobedient spirits (All men sin and fall short of the Glory of God). It is by the Spirit of Christ that the spirit of man in the flesh (*the spirits in prison*) hears the gospel of the grace of God. We don't hear because we have better ears, or because we are better listeners, or because we are smarter people. We hear the testimony of Christ preached because, in Christ we have been given spiritual ears to hear His preaching. As indeed is delineated in 1st John:

1st John 2:27

- "But the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you: but as ***the same anointing teacheth you of all things***, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in him."

The teaching/proclaiming/preaching/declaring of the Spirit to the elect is Christ preaching to spirits in prison. Likewise, it was the same *for the Old Testament saints*. It is Christ's quickening Spirit that freed them from the spiritual captivity/prison and caused them to trust God and receive His Word. It was by this same witnessing Spirit of Christ that God preached to Noah and brought him (*and his own*) the message of deliverance. The context bears this out. By faith the efficacy of the cross reaches all the way back to Noah, even to Able, as Christ is the Lamb that was slain from the foundation of the world ([Revelation 13:8](#)) for them. The idiom of a prison represents the captivity of spiritual darkness, which is bondage and servitude to sin, in which all Satan's children are held fast. This is what Christ went to the cross to do. Through it He witnessed to these prisoners of their deliverance. This is the prophecy that was

long ago foretold. These truths are spiritually discerned through God's Word. Jesus put it as plain as it can get when He referenced that the fulfillment of this prophesy was in Him:

Luke 4:18

- "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He hath anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He hath sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to ***Preach Deliverance to the Captives***, and Recovering of sight to the blind, ***to Set at Liberty*** them that are bruised."

Clearly Christ is talking about His being anointed to preach deliverance to those in spiritual prison (*captivity*), that He had come as prophesied to set them at liberty. Clearly it is talking about those spirits that are in this world, not in any alleged underworld or limbo. God is not speaking of a theoretical sojourn into the mythical purgatory to preach to the dead. God is talking about His fulfilling the prophesy of preaching deliverance to the spiritually dead. Clearly Christ is talking about the salvation of all those for whom He came to set free. Clearly it's talking about the preaching of deliverance that is done by the Spirit of Christ, freeing those held captive by Satan. God is signifying that the prophesy of Isaiah is being fulfilled in the salvation of those who are set free from bondage to sin. All who become saved are those being brought out of the prison of darkness into the glorious light of Christ that they might see. These are the spirits in prison that the Word declares Christ (*by his death and resurrection*) preached to. Note that Luke 4:18 clearly says that this is the very purpose Christ that came to accomplish. This is the real accomplishment of the death and resurrection of Christ. That by it, He brought the "good News" of Liberty to the spirits in prison. When Jesus read in the Holy Temple those words of Isaiah ([Luke 4:18](#)) and said that He was the fulfillment, He was directing us to *search the Scriptures* and understand the true spiritual nature of that prophesy. To understand what that prison represented, and who the spirits therein represented, and how He was anointed to preach deliverance from that very same prison. Consider wisely the original prophesy of the Coming Christ, in conjunction with How Christ says He fulfilled it.

Isaiah 61:1

- "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me; because the Lord hath anointed Me to **Preach Good Tidings** unto the meek; He hath sent Me to bind up the brokenhearted, ***to proclaim liberty to the captives***, and the ***opening of the Prison*** to them that are bound."

Is God saying that Christ will come and go to the physical, literal prison houses of the Romans because that is what He is sent to do? Did Christ come to physically set prisoners free from literal earthly prisons? Were the captives in this prison whom Christ was prophesied to preach deliverance to? Did He preach that type deliverance to John the Baptist or the criminals who had broken the Roman law? No, not at all. These are prophesies of spiritual prisoners who had broken God's laws. In other words, the spiritual prisoners that Christ was sent to preach liberty to, were us. All

teachings of the souls within mythical Limbo or purgatory or some intermediate holding pen are bankrupt.

Isaiah 42:6

- "I, The Lord have called Thee in Righteousness, and will hold Thine hand, and will keep Thee, and give Thee for a ***Covenant*** of the people, and a light of the Gentiles;
- To OPEN the blind eyes, to ***bring out the Prisoners from the Prison***, and them that sit in darkness out of ***the Prison House***."

Again, there is God's Word defining the prison He was sent to, as clear as day. God is obviously not declaring that the prison houses of the day would not have enough light in them, or that Christ was to literally go to these prisons and free those who were held captive there. This is figurative or symbolic language to illustrate man's spiritual captivity. It is self-evident that Christ had the perfect opportunity to free John the Baptist from his physical prison if that was His purpose in coming, but John remained in prison because the prophecy was not about setting spirits free from man made or earthly prisons. Nor was it a prophecy to set spirits free from physical death or purgatorial prisons. The prison house that was in view was our dark detention in the house bondage wherein we served. The spirits in "***this***" prison are obviously the spirits that Christ came to preach liberty to. They (*as all of us*) were spiritual prisoners and had death hanging over their heads wherein they needed to have spiritual witness of deliverance. The context of 1st Peter illustrates that Christ delivered not only Luke, Peter, you and I, but Abel, Abraham, Lot, and Noah and the eight souls that were with Him in the Ark as well. He set their spirits free just as He did the Apostles 2000 years ago, and ours today. For the efficacy of the real work and accomplishment of the cross reaches to the beginning and extends to the end. For our God is the beginning and the end, the only Saviour, the Lamb slain from before the foundation of the world *because* His blood covers those who were saved even before the time of the cross. The Spirit of Christ rested upon those righteous men like Noah (yes, they had it) because of the retroactive effectiveness of His work on the cross. By faith the Spirit of Christ preached to these spiritual prisoners beforehand, of what would be made effectual **by** His future death and resurrection. Just as it preaches to our spirits of what "was" made effectual long ago at the cross. In other words, they were under Grace looking "forward" to the coming Messiah, as we are under Grace looking "backward" at the visitation of the Messiah. In fact, if we would just read a few chapters before, we can see where God speaks about this same Spirit of Christ preaching (testifying) to the Old Testament prophets of the death and resurrection of Christ by which they would be delivered.

..and he who hath an ear, let him hear.

1st Peter 1:11

- "Searching what, or what manner of ***time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did Signify***, when ***it testified beforehand*** the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow.

Unambiguously we read that the Spirit of Christ was in those Old Testament saints, and it testified (which is another word for preached) within them, the glory of the atonement of Christ that would come. This is how Christ preaches to men. By His Spirit declaring God's truth to our spirits.

Romans 8:16

- "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God:"

The Spirit of Christ within us preaches to our spirit, and that is how we were drawn to Him and saved. By His death and resurrection, and ours in Him ([Colossians 2:12-13](#)), we have Christ preached or testified to us. This is true in both our day and in Noah's day, because we all are sometimes disobedient and by grace of God had to have our sins covered in His propitiation. That efficacy of Christ's atonement reaches all the way to the Old Testament prophets as the Spirit of Christ testified of it to them beforehand. Just as the Spirit of Christ testifies to us now. Without Christ dying and being resurrected for Noah and his, as well as those of us today, we would all remain spirits in prison destined for the damnation of hell. We were both washed clean by the figure of water, the token of the death and resurrection in Christ. When Jesus Christ said, this day is this Scripture fulfilled in your ears ([Luke 4:20-21](#)) He was talking about preaching deliverance to the spirits in prison and of freeing them from the house of bondage, which is Satan's domain. As also was His teaching in the parable of the strong man's house (Satan's kingdom):

Mark 3:27

- "No man can enter into a strong man's house, and spoil his goods, except he will first bind the strong man; and then He will spoil his House."

If we study of this verse carefully, and in context, we see that: **1.** The house here is Satan's spiritual kingdom wherein all mankind was held captive.

2. The strong man who rules the house is Satan.

3. Jesus is the one who came to the strong man's house to spoil (*seize or take by Conquest his possessions*).

4. We (the Elect) were the possessions of Satan's house that Christ came to spoil. **5.** In order to do that, first the Strong Man (*Satan*) had to be bound.

And Christ said if this is true, then the Kingdom of God had come ([Matthew 12:28-29](#)) to them. The possessions of the prison house of Satan that Christ came to spoil are all the chosen of God. When we were witnessed to by the Spirit and saved, we were taken from the house of Satan (spirits delivered from his prison) and transferred into the Kingdom of our deliverer, Christ.

Colossians 1:13

- "Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son:"

There again we see exactly what is that darkness ([Isaiah 42:6-7](#); [Luke 1:79](#)) of the

Prison of Satan that Christ came to deliver us from. We are now children of light, no longer in captivity or in bondage to that spiritual prison house of darkness ([Ephesians 5:8](#); [1st Thessalonians 5:4-5](#)). We have had the gospel preached to us by the quickening Spirit of Christ and are no longer spirits in that prison. Translated, we become spirits in Christ's kingdom, servants of God set free from the bondage of sin. Even as Christ told Israel of the true nature of liberty and servitude:

John 8:34

- "...whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin. and the servant abideth not in THE HOUSE for ever: but the son abideth ever. If the Son therefore shall make you FREE, ye shall be free indeed (Truly)."

Like many Christians today, they didn't understand Jesus' Words of captivity, servitude and freedom either. They retorted, "we be Abraham's seed and were never in bondage to anyone." They didn't understand that Jesus was talking about the "spiritual" prison house that they were held captive in. He was declaring it was this prison that He came to deliver them from. Not from rule of the Romans, not to establish a earthly Kingdom, not to restore political rule to the nation, but to proclaim deliverance to the spirits in this prison. That's the House that [Mark 3:27](#) and [Matthew 12:29](#) talks about in saying Christ came to spoil it. The prison House where Satan holds the spirits in darkness. How did Christ free those captives? ...exactly as the curious 1st Peter verse so unambiguously declares. **By** his death and resurrection.

1st Peter 3:18-19

- "For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, **<i>being put to death in the flesh, but made alive by the Spirit**

: So then, as we study the question of 1st Peter 3:18 and how did Jesus preach to the spirits in prison (in the light of the whole Bible), and consider all that it has to say concerning how Christ's death and resurrection did this, we get a clearer (and more importantly, Biblical) perspective of what is actually being said there. It is the Holy Spirit that testifies or preaches and guides us to freedom in truth. Understanding this, we see that it all fits perfectly into place, and we shouldn't be surprised at the harmony because that's what happens when we listen to the real truth of God interpreting His own Word, rather than theorizing or leaning unto what seems right in our own eyes ([Proverbs 3:5](#)). It all harmonizes together marvelously throughout God's Word, like a gigantic picture puzzle where every piece perfectly in place. This "signifying" that it is the correct way to view the Portrait designed and painted by the author. God's Word testifies of itself that it is true, via the Holy Spirit. These for whom Christ died are the spirits in prison that 1st Peter declares Christ went and preached to "by His death and resurrection." That's really the Key. That it was by or in His death and resurrection. This is how He testified deliverance unto spirits in prison. It was done once for all at the cross. There was no secondary, off-campus, preaching deliverance to spirits in prison.

1st Peter assures us of the immutability of God's salvation program. As it is today, so it was in days of Noah through faith. When those Old Testament saints brought the gospel to others, it was by the Spirit of Christ speaking through them to those who were in spiritual prisons. It was Christ, in the Spirit, who preached or testified to them of the coming deliverance. It was by the

death and resurrection of the Messiah that they were saved, just as we are. Try as one may to place purgatory or limbo (*or whatever name man applies to such theories*) into the Scriptures, he cannot. It will not stand the "Light" of the Bible text. Faithfulness to the Word simply will not allow it. It is because of the Spirit of Christ that whenever we preach the Word of God to unsaved people, we are preaching to the spirits in prison. Spirits that can only be set free through the efficacious work of Christ's death and resurrection.

Let us preach to them in the Spirit of truth of Christ declaring that *now the day of salvation*. It is not coming in any future mythical realm of consciousness or purgatory. For it is written, It is appointed unto men once to die, and then the judgment. Now is the day of salvation.

May the Lord God who is Gracious above all, give us wisdom to rightly divide His Word of truth.

Amen!

Peace,

Copyright ©1995 Tony Warren

For other studies free for the Receiving, Visit our web Site

The Mountain Retreat! <http://www.mountainretreatorg.net>

Feel free to duplicate, display or distribute this publication to anyone so long as the above copyright notice remains intact and there are no changes made to the article. This publication can be distributed only in its original form, unedited, and without cost.

Created 10/3/95 / Last Modified 08/14/14

The Mountain Retreat / twarren10@aol.com

[\[Eschatology\]](#) | [\[Bible Studies\]](#) | [\[Classics\]](#) | [\[Articles\]](#) | [\[Other Articles\]](#) | [\[Sermons\]](#) | [\[Apologetics\]](#) | [\[F.A.Q.\]](#) | [\[Forum\]](#)

The Mountain Retreat