

## How Do We Understand Confusing Bible Passages?

[1 Peter 3:18-22](#)

1 Peter, Day 17

*For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, 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. 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, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.*

- 1 Peter 3:18-22, ESV

If you're going to head south on I-95 for a long road trip, you know Washington, DC is coming. Likewise, when I began our series in 1 Peter, I knew today's passage was coming. Few passages in the New Testament have caused as much confusion or given rise to as many false teachings as these few verses at the end of 1 Peter 3. From this one small section of 1 Peter, people have gotten these false ideas:

1. That Jesus was only spiritually resurrected, because Peter says He was "*put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit.*"
2. That people get a second chance at salvation after death, because Jesus "*went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison*" who "*formerly did not obey.*"
3. That baptism saves people (baptismal regeneration) because Peter says, "*Baptism . . . now saves you.*"

Some of these ideas seem to be clearly taught here, at least at first glance, on a superficial reading of the passage. So, how do we handle difficult passages like this one?

Let me offer a few guidelines and then apply those to today's passage:

1. The Bible almost never teaches a truth in only one place. The Biblical principle of "*Let everything be established by two or three witnesses*" seems to apply to the truths taught by Scripture, too.
2. While the Bible is progressive in the nature of its revelation (not everything is revealed all at once), the Bible does not contradict itself.
3. We need to read both the text and the context carefully.
4. We need to allow clearer passages to inform and enlighten our understanding of less clear passages.
5. If a verse or passage has multiple possible interpretations, we should go with the interpretation that best harmonizes with the rest of Scripture.

Now, to apply these principles to this passage:

1. Jesus was not "spiritually" resurrected; He was bodily resurrected. This is clearly attested to multiple times in the Gospels, in Acts, and in the Epistles.
2. The Bible is also clear in multiple places that people don't get a second chance at salvation after they die.
3. Regarding baptism, the Bible clearly teaches that we are saved by God's grace through faith alone in Christ alone, not by works that we do.

So, what do these verses mean?

We don't have space here to explore all of the possible interpretations, so I'll just focus on what I think the passage teaches: In the days of Noah, Jesus was preaching through Noah, by the Holy Spirit, as Noah was making

his appeal to people to flee from the judgment to come and to seek salvation in the ark. Eight people were saved from God's judgment on the Ark, because they trusted God's promises.

Baptism is a picture of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. We know it is not the physical act of baptism which saves, for Peter says, "*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.*" In other words, baptism is the physical representation of an appeal to God for cleansing of our consciences from sin through Jesus Christ, who has conquered sin and death.

If we understand this passage properly, we see that nothing new is being taught here. Peter's language may be a bit unusual, but the truths he is teaching are clear, biblical truths recorded for us elsewhere in God's word.

In the context of I Peter 3-4, this passage is intended to encourage believers suffering persecution to remember the example of Noah and to persevere in the face of ridicule or persecution. Just as Noah's faith in God was vindicated when he was saved from God's wrath by the ark, so we will be saved from the judgment to come by Jesus, our Ark of Refuge, as God keeps the promises made in baptism and fulfilled in Christ.