

‘Not so easy to understand.’ (17)

We’ve continuing our study of **1+2 Peter** and we’ve come to a section in **1 Peter 3** which isn’t the easiest of texts to understand. In fact I’m sure you will notice that as we go on today, this will sound more like a Bible study rather than a sermon at times. But before we get started let me ask you a question, **what do you get when you cross a librarian with a lawyer? All the information you need but you can't understand a word of it.**

And loved ones sometimes the Bible is like that, there are people who claim to understand every single biblical text you find in the Bible. But the truth is that any respected Bible preacher or teacher will tell you that sometimes we come across a text which gives us lots of information but at the same time it is not so easy to understand a word of it.

When we get to **2 Peter** he is going to remind us of this very fact, he is going to remind us that even the apostle Paul found some things difficult to understand. **2 Peter 3:15+16 “And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.”**

Paul knew that some things were difficult to understand, Paul knew that people would twist the Scriptures because of their ignorance and I’m sure the apostle Peter himself would agree. And in our text today Peter is going to talk about something which isn’t so straightforward to understand and many people have twisted it to make it fit in with their own understanding.

**1 Peter 3:18-20 “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.”**

Now like I said these few verses are considered by some to be some of the most difficult passages in the Bible to understand. There have been many books and articles written about what Peter means and so what I want to do today is share with you **two** of those ideas. And then a little later I will share with you where I’m at in my understanding of this passage of Scripture. And we’re also going to talk about a subject which a lot of people don’t want to hear about. A subject where few preachers will even dare to mention these days, we’re going to talk about a place which is as real as heaven.

Anyway around the year **200 AD** a man named **Clement of Alexandria** was a Christian theologian and the head of the noted **Catechetical School of Alexandria**. And he believed concerning **1 Peter 3:18-20** that Jesus Christ went to Hades in His spirit **between** His death and His resurrection. He believed that Jesus proclaimed the message of salvation to the souls of sinners imprisoned there since the flood.

**Now what does all that mean?** Well basically it means that he believed that for some reason Jesus went to hell to preach the gospel and the souls in hell were given a **second chance**. Now loved ones as much as that idea may delight the ears of many, it’s totally unbiblical. **Have you ever had an appointment at the doctors or the dentist and something came up where you couldn’t keep the appointment?**

Now some people take the time to call and cancel the appointment but others don’t even bother to tell them they can’t make it. And then we have other people who simply forget they have an appointment until the day is past, so they have to make another one. But loved ones, we all have an appointment coming up which we can’t cancel and we won’t miss whether we forget or not.

**Hebrews 9:27 “Just as people are appointed to die once, and then to face judgment”**. And so according to **Hebrews 9:27** our first appointment is with death and no matter how long we live on this earth, our time will come. And after our appointment with death we have another appointment we won’t miss. We have our second appointment with Jesus Himself on Judgement Day. And you need to know that when our second appointment is due there won’t be any **second chances**, loved ones.

**I heard a story about a preacher whose tears were streaming from his eyes as the Spirit of God directed him toward three young men on the back pew. The message that night had been on the "The Horrors of Hell."**

The man of God had made a passionate plea, attempting to rescue any soul bound for that awful place. As he approached the trio, he was about to ask them to please come to the Lord and confess their sins. Before he could utter a word, one of them smirked and said, "Huh, preacher, how far is it to hell, anyway?" The other two laughed and they all turned and exited quickly from the church. The preacher heard the squeal of the tires as they pulled out on the road and sped away. His broken heart followed them as far as possible, hoping they would return.

As the preacher was praying, the police came to the front door of the church building and asked the congregation "Do any of you know three young men?" and he went on to describe what they were wearing. The people responded that they did and wondered aloud why he asked. The officer sadly unfolded the story. Just two and one-half miles down the road, at the big bend, their car had left the road and split in half around a large oak tree. The people hurried to their cars. When they arrived, they found three dead bodies lying beside the road.

Loved ones, it was 2 ½ miles to hell for those young men. You see none of us realize how close death is to us, it stalks our every step and waits around every corner. Remember God says in **Hebrews 9:27** "Just as people are appointed to die once, and then to face judgment".

In reality, I suppose we're all just one breath away from judgment and at any moment, we could meet all the facts of our life, which will dictate where we spend eternity. We've got one chance to be right with God and it's in this lifetime. And if we don't get it right whilst we are alive, then hell is the place we will be going to and kept there until Judgment Day.

And so to say that Jesus proclaimed the message of salvation to the souls of sinners imprisoned there since the flood is totally contradictory to Peter's words himself. Peter himself said in **2 Peter 2:4+5** "For if God did not spare the angels who sinned, but threw them into hell and locked them up in chains in utter darkness, to be kept until the judgment, and if he did not spare the ancient world, but did protect Noah, a herald of righteousness, along with seven others, when God brought a flood on an ungodly world."

He also said following on in **2 Peter 2:9** "Then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from their trials, and to reserve the unrighteous for punishment at the Day of Judgment." Why would Jesus preach the gospel in hell and give these souls a second chance when the Bible itself says that they are reserved under punishment for the Day of Judgment?

They didn't miss their first appointment and now they are being kept in prison awaiting their second appointment. Ask yourself, why would people before the flood be given a second chance when those after the flood are not? **Romans 2:11** "For there is no partiality with God". In **Acts 10** when Peter was speaking to a Gentile named Cornelius Peter says in **Acts 10:34** "I now truly understand that God does not show favouritism in dealing with people."

Loved ones, God doesn't have one way for people being saved and another way for a separate group of people to be saved after they have died. We've had a whole lifetime to get ourselves right with God, there will be no second chances. And if you haven't got that proper relationship with God this morning then I plead with you to take **Isaiah's** advice. **Isaiah 55:6** "Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near."

Now you might think my words are a bit heavy, but for those who aren't Christians you need to know that today maybe the only chance you get. And I wouldn't be doing my job properly if I didn't preach about these things. Let's read **1 Peter 3:18-20** again just to keep it fresh in our minds.

**1 Peter 3:18-20** "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."

Another view of this passage of Scripture is found in the year **1600 AD** by a man named **Cardinal Bellarmine** who was an **Italian Jesuit** and a **Cardinal of the Catholic Church**. He believed that the Spirit of Christ went to release the souls of the righteous who repented before the flood and had been kept in a place they call **limbo**. Now in **Catholic theology**, **limbo** is the place between heaven and hell, where the souls of the Old Testament saints were kept.

Now again the problem with this theory is quit simple, the Bible is totally silent about a place such as **limbo**. Also notice that the spirits which Peter is talking about according to **1 Peter 3:20** were disobedient in the days of Noah.

To say that the Spirit of Christ went to release the souls of the **righteous** who repented **before** the flood is a misunderstanding because at the time of the flood there were no righteous people around only Noah and his family. Genesis 6:5-13 “And the Lord saw that the sin of man was great on the earth, and that all the thoughts of his heart were evil. And the Lord had sorrow because he had made man on the earth, and grief was in his heart. And the Lord said, I will take away man, whom I have made, from the face of the earth, even man and beast and that which goes on the earth and every bird of the air; for I have sorrow for having made them. But Noah had grace in the eyes of God. These are the generations of Noah. Noah was an upright man and without sin in his generation: he went in the ways of God. And Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth. And the earth was evil in God's eyes and full of violent ways. And God, looking on the earth, saw that it was evil: for the way of all flesh had become evil on the earth. And God said to Noah, The end of all flesh has come; the earth is full of their violent doings, and now I will put an end to them with the earth”.

Now think about this loved ones, if others had repented, **would they not also have been on the ark?** Genesis 7:1 “And the Lord said to Noah, Take all your family and go into the ark, for you only in this generation have I seen to be upright.” Loved ones, Christ in His Spirit didn't go anywhere to save those who were righteous before the flood because there were none, just Noah and His family.

Now let's have another look at this passage but this time we will try and keep it in its context. 1 Peter 3:18-20 “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.” Now remember our Bibles are split into book, chapter and verse and sometimes that is helpful and other times it's not so helpful.

Let's go back to 1 Peter 2:18-24 where Peter writes, “Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”

Peter reminded us that if suffering should come our way then the Christian should make sure they are suffering for the right reasons. In other words if you're going to suffer, suffer for doing good not for doing evil. And then when we go to 1 Peter 3:13-22 where he returns to the theme of suffering again. And he informs us about **three different suffering situations**.

In 1 Peter 3:13+14 he reminds us about the possible suffering of Christians, “Now who is he who will harm you, if you become imitators of that which is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you are blessed. “Don't fear what they fear, neither be troubled.” In 1 Peter 3:18 he reminds us of the suffering of Christ, “Because Christ also suffered for sins once, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring you to God; being put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.”

And finally in 1 Peter 3:20 he reminds us of the suffering of the disobedient souls **before** the flood, “Those souls who before were disobedient, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, while the ship was being built. In it, few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water.”

You see what Peter is telling us loved ones is that those who rebelled against God in the days of Noah, suffered at the hand of God for doing evil. But the end result wasn't a blessing but imprisonment after they had died. Peter is telling us that Jesus suffered whilst He was alive but He did it for the good. And the reason He did it for the good was because He did for God.

**And what was the end result?** According to 1 Peter 3:21+22, Jesus was resurrected and enthroned at the right hand of God. 1 Peter 3:21+22 “The resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, angels and authorities and powers being made subject to him.”

You see Christian; we need to choose what it will be. **1 Peter 3:14** gives us the choice to suffer for doing good and the end result will be salvation beyond the grave. That's why Peter talks about being raised with Christ in **1 Peter 3:21**. That's why in the very **same verse** Peter talks about baptism being a commitment to obedience. But those who were baptized during Noah's time with the flood figuratively speaking were imprisoned beyond the grave because of their commitment to their disobedience.

What Peter is doing loved ones is comparing the two, he's saying back in Noah's day those who didn't listen to God, their flood baptism resulted in death and imprisonment. But the Christian baptism results in life, it results in renewed life to God through the resurrection and glorification of Jesus Christ. He's saying if you're going to suffer Christian, even to the point of death at least you didn't die at the hand of God like those who were around at Noah's time.

Peter says that the spirits are those to whom Noah preached when Noah and they were very much alive. But and this is important by the time Peter writes this letter, those very same spirits are long gone and they are now spirits who are in prison. He gives us the same kind of idea over in **1 Peter 4:6** **"For to this end the Good News was preached even to the dead, that they might be judged indeed as men in the flesh, but live as to God in the spirit."**

Now **does Peter mean that the gospel was preached to those who were already dead?** No, what he means is that they were dead whilst Peter wrote this letter but they were very much alive whilst the gospel was being preached to them. Now you may well be thinking this is all very well, **but didn't Jesus preach to these spirits when He was in the grave for three days?** Again this is a very popular theory but loved ones, whatever Jesus got up to whilst He was in the grave is a mystery and will remain a mystery because the Bible doesn't tell us. And to use this passage to argue this theory is a total misunderstanding of the text.

Now remember what Peter said, back in **1 Peter 1:11+12**, **"Concerning this salvation, the prophets sought and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you, searching for who or what kind of time the Spirit of Christ, which was in them, pointed to, when he predicted the sufferings of Christ, and the glories that would follow them"**.

And also remember that Noah was a preacher of righteousness according to **2 Peter 2:5**. And so what Peter is saying loved ones is that the Spirit of Christ, in other words, the Holy Spirit spoke through the prophets to the people when they were alive. And what he's saying here in **1 Peter 3:19** is that the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit spoke through Noah to the people when they were alive. He's not talking about what happened when Jesus was in the grave and we shouldn't make a text mean something it doesn't say.

Now whatever you make of these words of Peter you need to know this is not a salvation issue. But the whole point of this sermon is to remind you of this, there are **two possible destinations** awaiting all of us and that part truly is a salvation issue. You remember the story of the rich man and Lazarus; turn your Bibles to **Luke 16**.

**Luke 16:19-31** **"There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.' And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house- for I have five brothers -so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'"**

Now here we have a clear story about the afterlife and notice the two different locations after they had their first appointment with death. While Lazarus was comforted in paradise, the rich man was tormented in hell. And also notice in-between them both there is a great gulf which is **fixed**, in other words there is no changing from one place to the other, it's fixed because there are no **second chances**.

You see, for the Christian when they die they go to paradise, and God bless them because they will stay there until they get their second appointment with Jesus on Judgment Day. But when you die and you're not a Christian, you will go to Hades; sadly you will also stay there until your second appointment with Jesus on Judgment Day. The point is after we die we can't change locations and if we didn't believe in God before we die we certainly will believe in Him when we do.

**But have you ever thought why? Why this heaven or hell?** Well it's certainly not because God loved Lazarus and didn't love the rich man. Their different destinies were the incredible outcome of their different character. Their different destinies were the incredible outcome of their different life styles, who they were and who they believed in. Their different destinies were the incredible outcome of whom they placed their confidence and hope in and they're different choices.

**2 Corinthians 5:10** says, "For we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done in the body, whether good or bad." Now I'm sure you will agree that this is a tough verse to digest, but it's inspired by God which means it's true. And the truth of the matter is that God doesn't have a way of getting anybody into heaven, if they have hell in their hearts.

**There was a preacher who was preaching one Sunday evening, telling everyone how bad hell could be. And there was this one man who would fall asleep every Sunday. And so the preacher got to the point in his sermon where he banged on the pulpit to emphasise how bad hell was and he shouted, "In fact if anyone here really wants to go to hell, let them stand up now."** Well, that groggy man, all he heard was the **stand up** part and so he did. **The whole church was in shock and they looked around at the man. Until finally the man turned around and said, "Well preacher, I don't know what we've just voted on, but it looks like we are the only ones for it!"**

A lot of people like to preach about heaven because it gives us hope and makes us feel good which it should. But the reality is that Jesus preached more about hell than any other person in the New Testament and if He says it's a real place then we better believe it's a real place.

So let me ask you, **does anyone here really want to go to hell?** And I want to tell you one thing about hell, I don't know much about it, but I will tell you this much. Whatever hell may be like, it is a burying ground for dead souls, souls that are dead in trespass and sin, that's what it is. You see loved ones, the story of the rich man and Lazarus tells us that we are going to live forever.

We are created in the image of God and indwelt with a soul that lives forever. And forever we are going to have to enjoy or suffer our destiny that we have created in this life. Whether it is through the grace of God to love and embrace His son, as our Saviour, and live with Him and be created anew by His Spirit. Or whether we are going to go our own and turn our back on God and on His Son and live for the day, live for the material things, live for how much we can store up and stash away.

Jesus spoke through the prophets of old for centuries, but only a few listened to Him. He spoke through Noah for 120 years but no-one except his family listened to Him. He still speaks to us today through His word and He is asking you **what will do you?**

Let me encourage you to plan ahead, just like it wasn't raining when Noah built the Ark, Jesus could return at anytime. Let me encourage you not to miss the boat, just as Noah and His family had to be in the ark to live, you need to be in Christ to live. And the way you get in Christ is to be baptised for the forgiveness of your sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit to help you make it in this life until you get to the next.

You might ask **why would a loving, caring God send anyone to hell?** Well loved ones that's not the question we should be asking, the question I would like to leave you with is this one. **Why would a loving, caring God allow a sinner like me into heaven?**

Like the sermon title says, some things are **'not so easy to understand'**. But God's plan for our salvation and our eternal future is something which is easy to understand, I pray you choose wisely because there are no second chances.