

“A Proclamation to the Spirits in Prison”

Genesis 9:8-17; 1 Peter 3:18-22

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Today we’re going to talk about what I think is one of the coolest concepts anywhere in the New Testament, a little detail that doesn’t typically get a whole lot of attention in many churches, but that speaks *volumes* about the kind of God we worship and serve. It’s really sweet. But we have a little bit of work to do to get there. We’re going to start with the familiar story of the covenant of the *rainbow*.

This is one of the more well-known stories in the Old Testament. It’s the culmination of the whole story of Noah and the flood, which spans several chapters in the book of Genesis. You remember the broad outlines of the story. God sent rain to cover the whole earth, for forty days, and every living creature on earth died – except for a fairly small handful. For there was a righteous man named Noah, whom God had told to build a large ark. Into the ark went Noah, and his wife, and their three sons, and their three wives – a total of eight people, four men and four women. Also into the ark went two of every living creature, one male and one female, from the largest of the large to the smallest of the small, including wild animals, domesticated animals, birds, and everything that creeps along the ground. They all went into the ark. “The flood continued forty days on the earth; and the waters increased, and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the earth.” (Genesis 7:17) Even the high mountains were covered by the waters of the flood. “And all flesh died that moved on the earth, birds, domestic animals, wild animals, all swarming creatures that swarm on the earth, and all human beings; everything on dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died.” (Genesis 7:21-22) “Only Noah was left, and those that were with him in the ark.” (Genesis 7:23) After five months the waters started to subside. Finally, a year and ten days after the deluge started, the earth was dry, and Noah and his family and all the animals disembarked. It was a new beginning – a completely fresh start for humans and animals alike.

Then God made a covenant with Noah, and all of Noah’s descendants, and all the animals. “Never again,” promised God; “never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood;” “never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” God created the rainbow, a sign in the sky to remind everyone – *including God* – of God’s perpetual promise to never send a flood to destroy the earth again.

Now, that’s all well and good. The human race gets a new beginning. But at what cost? The cost of the lives of *almost every living being on earth*. This is the part of the story that isn’t so pleasant. There had been a *reason* why God had done this. “The earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth.” (Genesis 6:11-12) “The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.” (Genesis 6:5-6) There was *evil*; there was *wickedness*; there was *corruption* and *violence*; there was a tremendous

amount of *sin*. God's solution: wipe them out. Wipe them *all* out – except for one righteous man, and the members of his household, and a representative sampling of every creature on earth.

It was a *drastic* measure. We're talking about a *catastrophic* amount of death and destruction. God's solution to the problem of evil and sin was *death* – to *kill* almost every living being on earth.

It was a measure that even God wasn't happy with. After it's all over, God said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done." (Genesis 8:21)

The fundamental problem was that *something had gone wrong with the human heart*. When God created the world, it was *good*; when God created humankind, it was *very good*. But then sin entered the world; evil corrupted God's good creation; things went rapidly downhill after that. It was – and still is – the most *massive* problem on earth. The amount of wickedness and evil that exists on earth, in the hearts and minds of individual human beings, is *immense*. The sheer volume of killing, and violence, and abuse, and theft, and dishonesty, and corruption, and wickedness of all sorts, is *massive*.

God didn't *fix* all that when Noah and his family got their fresh start. Almost immediately, things started to go *wrong again*. Just because God had saved one righteous man and his family didn't mean that *sin* and *evil* had effectively been dealt with. For that, the world would have to wait for *Jesus*. God would find a way to deal with evil and sin *permanently*, in a once-for-all sacrifice on the cross, and in the *life* that God gives us, through the faith of Jesus Christ, implanted in our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

Which brings us to the passage from the first epistle of Peter. This is, to most of us, less familiar territory. But it is incredibly *rich* in its meaning and significance for our lives. Let's walk through it.

"For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God." (1 Peter 3:18) Peter is talking here about Christ's great work of *atonement*, his self-giving sacrifice on the cross, in which he took upon himself all the sins of the world. "The Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world," we call him. One righteous Savior offered his life on behalf of all the *unrighteous* people on earth, all of us whose lives are stained by sin (which is to say, *all* of us). The goal of all this was to bring us into a renewed and right relationship with God. So far, so good.

"He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit" (1 Peter 3:18) – here Peter is talking about Christ's *death*, and his resurrection, and his ascension. Again, pretty straightforward.

But then we get this: "in which he also went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water." (1 Peter 3:19-20) What is all this? Peter had been talking about *Jesus*; now he's suddenly gone to this story from the epic past, to talk about Noah and the other seven people whom God saved from the flood. What's the connection?

This is one of the most obscure parts of the New Testament, right here. It's also one of the most *beautiful*. Because what Peter is saying is that *all those people who died in the waters of the flood were given a second chance*. They were given an opportunity to *redeem* themselves. They were given an opportunity to *hear the gospel of Jesus Christ* – to *hear* it, and to *respond*, in both repentance and faith.

Specifically: "in which he also went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison who in former times did not obey." Who's the "he"? That's Jesus. What's Jesus doing? He is going, *in the*

spirit, that is, after his earthly body has been destroyed, to the abode of the dead. Remember, Jesus *died*. He died, just like everybody else dies. Ancient Jewish belief held that every soul who died went to the abode of the dead. In the Old Testament, it was called “Sheol” or “the Pit.” It’s kind of like the underworld in Greek mythology. Everybody who died ended up there. Even good, righteous people like Samuel ended up there; there’s a scene in 1 Samuel 28 in which the spirit of the dead Samuel is briefly brought up from the underworld. So at the time of Jesus, according to this view, the underworld was filled with everyone who had ever died. No one was making their way to *heaven* yet. The spirits of the dead were all in this underworld – both the good and the bad. So, think through the Old Testament – there’s Adam and Eve; and Noah; and Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and Moses and Miriam and Aaron; and David and Solomon; and Ruth and Esther; and Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel; and a whole host of other really important people – not to mention a countless array of people whose names we don’t even know, like all those people who died in the waters of the flood. *None of those people had ever had an opportunity to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ*. Nobody had ever proclaimed the *Gospel* to them.

Until Jesus died. As the creeds put it, he “descended into hell,” or he “descended to the dead.” And what did he do there? *He preached the Gospel*. He gave all those people an opportunity to *hear his truth* and profess their faith in him. All this takes place in that two-day interval between Jesus’s death on Good Friday and Christ’s resurrection Easter Sunday. Sunday morning dawns, and *up* goes Jesus, returning to the earth from the realm of the dead; then, forty days later, *up* he goes again, ascending into heaven. All those people who *heard his testimony* in the underworld, and *believed in him*, were given the opportunity to leave the abode of the dead, and make a new home in the heavenly realm.

So, Jesus went on a *rescue mission* to the underworld, to offer those souls *salvation*. There are a few references to that mission in New Testament. This passage in First Peter is one of the most explicit.

But wait, there’s more! We now understand what it means that Jesus “went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison” – but what does Peter mean when he says “And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you”? What does it mean that the flood story *prefigures* the rite of baptism?

The Greek word signifies one thing *resembling* another thing. A *counterpart*. Peter is saying that the flood story and the rite of baptism *correspond* to one another. How so? Because in both instances, God uses *water* to *save* people, and God uses water to *deal with sin*. The waters of the flood washed away all the evil and sin that was on the earth at the time. Likewise, the waters of baptism wash away our *own* inclination to evil and sin. The waters of the flood brought eight people to a place where they could begin a new life. Likewise, the waters of baptism bring each of us to the beginning of *our* new life. We die to our old life and rise to a new life. Peter is clear: baptism isn’t about washing dirt off our bodies; it’s not what happens on the *outside* that matters. It’s what happens on the *inside*. It’s the internal transformation of our *heart*, as we place our faith and trust in Jesus, that *changes* us. It leads us *away* from sin and evil, and leads us *towards* righteousness and a new life with God.

It gives us, to use Peter’s words, “a good conscience.” The ability to make *good* choices. The ability to say “no” to all the things that tempt us, and “yes” to the things that please God. The next time you are tempted to stray from God’s path, *think about the waters of salvation* that save us from sin.

For the reality is that – despite all the evil and wickedness that *still exists* in the world – God chooses to be a God who *saves*. A God who leads people to *new live*, through *salvation* in Jesus Christ.

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