

Between Death and the Resurrection

1 Peter 3

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The following is an excerpt from
The MacArthur New Testament Commentary on 1 Peter 3.

having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, who once were disobedient, (3:18b–20a)

Some critics have disputed Christ's resurrection from the dead by claiming He never died in the first place. According to such skeptical reasoning, He merely fainted into a semi-coma on the cross, was revived in the coolness of the tomb, unwrapped Himself, and walked out. But the phrase **having been put to death in the flesh** leaves no doubt that on the cross Jesus' physical life ceased. To hasten the deaths of the two thieves at Calvary crucified on either side of Christ, the Roman executioners broke their legs (John 19:31–32). (Crucifixion victims postponed their deaths as long as possible by pushing themselves up on their legs, which allowed them to gasp for another breath.) However, the soldiers did not bother to break Christ's legs because they could see He was already dead. Confirming that reality, one of them pierced His side with a spear, causing blood and water to flow out, a physiological sign He was certainly dead (19:33–37).

The phrase **made alive in the spirit** is a reference to Jesus' eternal inner person. The Greek text omits the definite article, which suggests Peter was not referring to the Holy Spirit, but that the Lord was spiritually alive, contrasting the condition of Christ's **flesh** (body) with that of His **spirit**. His eternal spirit has always been alive, although His earthly body was then dead; but three days later His body was resurrected in a transformed and eternal state.

Some interpreters think the aforementioned phrase describes Jesus' resurrection. But if the apostle had intended to make such a reference he would have used an expression such as, "He was put to death in the flesh but made alive in the *flesh*." The resurrection was not merely a spiritual reality—it was physical (cf. Luke 24:39; John 20:20, 27). Thus Peter's point here must be that though Jesus' body was dead, He remained **alive in His spirit** (cf. Luke 23:46).

Although Christ is the One who is eternal life itself (1 John 5:20), He did experience a kind of spiritual death—defined not as cessation of existence but an experience of separation from God. While on the cross, Jesus was fully conscious as He cried out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matt. 27:46). That utterance reflected His temporary and humanly incomprehensible sense of alienation from the Father while God's full wrath and the burden of sinners' iniquities were placed on Him and judged (cf. 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 3:10–13; Heb. 9:28). For that brief time, Christ's experience paralleled the condition of unbelievers who live, paradoxically, in spiritual death (separation from God) in this life and face divine judgment in physical death (cf. Dan. 12:2; Matt. 25:41, 46; Mark

9:43–48; John 3:36; Rev. 20:15). In His death for sin and resurrection to eternal glory, Christ conquered death; however, unregenerate sinners die their own deaths for their unrepented sins and go to eternal shame and punishment.

In which also refers to what occurred with His living spirit while His dead physical body lay in the tomb (concerning His burial, see Matt. 27:57–60; John 19:38–42). **He went** (*poreuomai*) denotes going from one place to another (see also v. 22, where the word is used concerning the ascension). When the text says Christ **made proclamation to the spirits now in prison**, it is indicating that He purposefully went to an actual place to make a triumphant announcement to captive beings before He arose on the third day.

The verb rendered **made proclamation** (*kerusso*) means that Christ “preached” or “heralded” His triumph. In the ancient world, heralds would come to town as representatives of the rulers to make public announcements or precede generals and kings in the processions celebrating military triumphs, announcing victories won in battle. This verb is not saying that Jesus went to preach the gospel, otherwise Peter would likely have used a form of the verb *euangelizo* (“to evangelize”). Christ went to proclaim His victory to the enemy by announcing His triumph over sin (cf. Rom. 5:18–19; 6:5–6), death (cf. Rom. 6:9–10; 1 Cor. 15:54–55), hell, demons, and Satan (cf. Gen. 3:15; Col. 2:15; Heb. 2:14; 1 John 3:8).

Christ directed His proclamation **to the spirits**, not human beings, otherwise he would have used *psuchai* (“souls”) instead of *pneumasin*, a word the New Testament never uses to refer to people except when qualified by a genitive (e.g., Heb. 12:23; “the spirits of the righteous”).

Ever since the fall of Satan and his demons, there has been an ongoing cosmic conflict between the angelic forces of good and evil (cf. Job 1–2; Dan. 10:13; Zech. 3:1; Eph. 6:16; Rev. 12:3–4; 16:12–14). After the devil’s apparent victory in inducing Adam and Eve (and consequently all their descendants) to fall into sin (Gen. 3:1–7; Rom. 5:12–14), God promised to the Evil One himself eventual destruction by Messiah, who would triumph with a crushing victory over him, despite suffering a minor wound from him (Gen. 3:15). Satan therefore sought to prevent this by the genocide of the Jews (cf. Est. 3:1–4:3) and the destruction of the Messianic line itself during the time of Joash (2 Chron. 22:10–12; cf. 23:3, 12–21). When all that failed, he attempted to kill the infant Messiah (Matt. 2:16–18). Thwarted at that, he tried to tempt Christ Himself to abandon His mission (Matt. 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13). Later, Satan incited the Jewish leaders and their followers to mob action that resulted in the Lord’s crucifixion (Mark 15:6–15). The diabolical Jewish leaders even saw to it that Jesus’ tomb was guarded lest He exit the grave (Matt. 27:63–66). The demons may have been celebrating their seeming victory in the wake of Christ’s death and burial—but only to soon be profoundly and permanently disappointed when the living Christ Himself arrived. The angelic spirits Christ was to address were **now in prison** (*phulake*; an actual place of imprisonment, not merely a condition).

At the present time believers must struggle against the powers of the unbound demon forces as those forces influence them through the corrupt world system over which Satan has rule. The apostle Paul told the Ephesian church, “Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12), which clearly says that the demonic hierarchy is actively and freely conducting its evil work in the world. It was not to such unbound spirits, but to the bound demons that Christ went to announce His triumph.

The book of Revelation calls this **prison** the “bottomless pit,” literally the “pit of the abyss.” Some analysis of Revelation 9:1–2 provides further understanding of the prison and its captive subjects.

With his theater of operations now restricted to the earth, and his time running out (cf. 12:12), Satan will now seek to marshal all of his demonic hosts—those already on earth, those cast to earth with him, and those incarcerated in the **bottomless pit** (literally “the pit of the abyss”). *Abussos* (**bottomless**) appears seven times in Revelation, always in reference to the abode of incarcerated demons (cf. 9:2, 11; 11:7; 17:8). Satan himself will be held prisoner there during the Millennium, chained and locked up with the other demonic prisoners (20:1, 3).

Scripture teaches that God has sovereignly chosen to incarcerate certain demons in that **pit** of punishment. Second Peter 2:4 says that “God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment.” The phrase “cast them into hell” is a participle derived from the Greek noun *Tartarus*. Just as Jesus used a term for hell derived from the Jewish vernacular (*Gehenna*; cf. Matt. 5:22), so Peter chose a term from Greek mythology with which his readers would be familiar. Tartarus was the name used in Greek literature for the place where the worst sinners, those who had offended the gods personally, went after death and were punished. The place where God keeps demons imprisoned is actually different from the imaginary place of Greek mythology. Yet the use of the term *Tartarus* does seem to convey the idea that because of the heinousness of their sin, God has imprisoned certain fallen angels in such a place of severest torment and isolation. They remain in that place, awaiting their sentencing to final punishment in the eternal lake of fire (Rev. 20:10, 13–14).

The demons incarcerated in the abyss are undoubtedly the most wicked, vile, and perverted of all the fallen angels. Jude describes some of them as “angels who did not keep their own domain, but abandoned their proper abode,” noting that God “has kept [them] in eternal bonds under darkness for the judgment of the great day, just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them, since they in the same way as these indulged in gross immorality and went after strange flesh, are exhibited as an example in undergoing the punishment of eternal fire” (Jude 6–7). That passage describes certain fallen angels who left the angelic domain to indulge in sexual sin with humans, just as the men of Sodom and Gomorrah attempted to engage in perverted sex with angels (Gen. 19:1, 4–5).

Peter reveals when this angelic sin occurred:

-For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water. (1 Peter 3:18–20).

The “spirits now in prison” in the abyss are those “who once were disobedient ... in the days of Noah.” They are the demons who cohabited with human women in Satan’s failed attempt to corrupt the human race ... (Gen. 6:1–4). That demons still fear being sent to the abyss is evident from the fact that some pled with Jesus not to send them there (Luke 8:31). That suggests that other demons have been incarcerated there since the events of Genesis 6. The demons released by Satan at the fifth trumpet may not include those who sinned in Noah’s day (cf. Jude 6), since they are said to be in

“eternal bonds” (Jude 6) until the final day when they are sent to the eternal lake of fire (20:10; Jude 7). Other demons imprisoned in the abyss may be the ones released. So the pit is the preliminary place of incarceration for demons from which some are to be released under this judgment. (John MacArthur, *Revelation 1–11*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary [Chicago: Moody, 1999], 257–58)

Peter further identifies the demons to whom Christ preached His triumphant sermon as those who **once were disobedient**. As the reason that God bound them permanently in the place of imprisonment, that **disobedience** is specifically related to something that happened in the time of Noah.

What was that disobedience that had such severe and permanent results? Peter’s readers must have been familiar with the specific sin committed by the imprisoned demons because the apostle did not elaborate on it. Genesis 6:1–4 gives the account of this demonic disobedience:

Now it came about, when men began to multiply on the face of the land, and daughters were born to them, that the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful; and they took wives for themselves, whomever they chose. Then the Lord said, “My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, because he also is flesh; nevertheless his days shall be one hundred and twenty years.” The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men, and they bore children to them. Those were the mighty men who were of old, men of renown.

Satan and his angels had already rebelled and been thrown out of heaven and eternally fixed in a state of unmixed wickedness. Satan had been successful in the Garden and his demonic force had been at work motivating corruption in the world.

The Genesis 6 account was perhaps the most heinous effort they made related to the God-ordained provision of marriage (v. 1). The demons mounted an attack on marriage and procreation that wickedly influenced subsequent generations.

“The sons of God” are juxtaposed against “the daughters of men.” The contrast is between supernatural beings and women. “Sons of God” cannot be men, or they would be called “sons of men.” Neither can they be righteous men of a righteous line of people, or Sethites (as some suggest), because that does not contrast with “daughters of men,” as if all women were unrighteous or all righteous “sons of God” were men only.

The oldest interpretation, the traditional Jewish view of ancient rabbis and modern Jewish commentators, as well as of the church fathers, is that “the sons of God” were demons, or fallen angels. The context of judgment in the Flood precludes holy angels from being in view (see Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary [Waco, Tex.: Word, 1987], 1:139).

The phrase “sons of God” (Heb., *bene haelohim*) always refers to angels in its other Old Testament uses (cf. Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7; Pss. 29:1; 89:6). The term is always used of those brought directly into being by God—not those who are procreated through human birth, such as Sethites, nobles, kings, or aristocracy. Heavenly spirits are being contrasted with earthly women. These, then, are fallen angels who acted perversely, overstepping the boundaries of their realm. They defied God by leaving

their spirit world to enter the human realm (as Satan had entered the animal world in Eden). This is the first biblical record of demon-possession, demons indwelling people.

Those wicked spirits were drawn to females, whom they saw as “beautiful” in some perverse and lascivious way. They are “the daughters” mentioned in 6:1 (not a special class of women), whom the demons took for wives. The Hebrew is *Laqach*, which describes marriage transactions (Gen. 4:19; 11:29; 12:19; 20:2–3; 25:1), not rape or fornication.

That certainly raises the question: How can spirit beings marry women? It is possible only if they dwell in human bodies, as angels can and have done (cf. Gen. 18:1–2, 8; 19:1, 5; Heb. 13:2). Those demons entered men’s bodies (a phenomenon frequently encountered by Christ and the apostles in the Gospel record), as is clear from the children who were born from those unions (Gen. 6:4). Though the children were human, there was a pervasive influence on them from the demons.

Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. The Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. The Lord said, “I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, from man to animals to creeping things and to birds of the sky; for I am sorry that I have made them.” (Gen. 6:5–7)

That the people were open to demons shows the evil of man at the time. Those wicked, demon-possessed men then produced a generation that was nothing but corrupt inside and out, needing to be destroyed.

Now the earth was corrupt in the sight of God, and the earth was filled with violence. God looked on the earth, and behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth. Then God said to Noah, “The end of all flesh has come before Me; for the earth is filled with violence because of them; and behold, I am about to destroy them with the earth. (Gen. 6:11–13)

The original temptation in the Garden may help explain the demonic strategy:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, “Indeed, has God said, ‘You shall not eat from any tree of the garden?’” The woman said to the serpent, “From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, ‘You shall not eat from it or touch it, or you will die.’” The serpent said to the woman, “You surely will not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate. (Gen. 3:1–6)

Satan’s plan in Eden was to convince Eve that she could become like God. She and Adam could be exalted to a higher life, escaping even the few limitations they experienced. If that was attractive—becoming more “supernatural”—before sin and death reigned, how attractive would it be after? Genesis 4 and 5 record that death reigned through all of creation and, with it, pain and sorrow (eight times in chapter 5 the phrase “he died” appears). It would be consistent with Satan’s strategy to promise a supernatural elevation, a transcendent experience, communion with the spirits, and

even victory over death and eternal life, through a perverse marital union.

Satan has always promised that if man is open to the spirit world, he can circumvent judgment and gain immortality. That insidious promise has a familiar ring to it. Certain false religions since then, beginning as early as the Babylonian mystery religions with their pagan fertility rites, have promised some magical way for humans to attain a higher level of existence (immortality or even godhood), with out-of-the-ordinary sexual relations playing a key part in the process.

But in spite of Satan's involvement and promise, the offspring of the Genesis 6 unions, though demonized, were only human beings and therefore targets for the divine judgment about to occur. When God drowned the world 120 years later, they would all perish because they were all "flesh" (Gen. 6:3). They were nothing other than depraved, demon-dominated people.

Genesis 6:4 adds: "The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men, and they bore children to them. Those were the mighty men who were of old, men of renown." "Nephilim" transliterates a Hebrew word meaning "the falling ones" or those of great power that crushes people. The text says they were on the earth already when the embodied demons went after the women. The term is used in one other place, Numbers 13:30–33, where it describes not a race of people, since none survived the Flood, but people in the land of Canaan who were powerful conquerors threatening Israel. When the faithless spies who went into Canaan wanted to stop Israel from going to battle, they described the people as Nephilim, borrowing the ancient transliteration to make their point, because the word was familiarly used to describe frightening enemies.

The phrase "and also afterward" makes the purpose of the Nephilim's mention clear. After the "sons of God" and "daughters of men" married, they proliferated children who were like the Nephilim—"mighty men who were of old, men of renown." Out of those unions came an abundance of infamous, powerful warriors, who like the Nephilim were heroes in a dangerous way—attaining power, reputation, and inducing fear in ancient times by being fierce and deadly. All of those offspring, along with the earlier Nephilim, were drowned, with the rest of the world (Genesis 7:23–24).

What seals this interpretation is the text here by Peter. The Lord proclaimed His triumph over Satan, sin, death and hell to the very worst of demons, who disobeyed God in the worst manner in the days of Noah before the Flood. The fallen angels' long effort to demonize people, hinder the redemptive purpose of God, and prevent the "seed" of the woman (Gen. 3:15) from crushing Satan's head and sending the demons into the lake of fire (Matt. 25:41; Rev. 19:20; 20:10, 14, 15) was ultimately foiled at the Cross.

In his second letter, Peter also briefly refers to the bound demons' sin:

For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment; and did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a preacher of righteousness, with seven others, when He brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; and if He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing them to ashes, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly lives thereafter. (2 Peter 2:4–6)

The perversion that brought the Flood is linked to the perversion that brought the fire and brimstone on Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18–19). Jude makes the same parallel:

And angels who did not keep their own domain, but abandoned their proper abode, He has kept in eternal bonds under darkness for the judgment of the great day, just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them, since they in the same way as these indulged in gross immorality and went after strange flesh, are exhibited as an example in undergoing the punishment of eternal fire. (vv. 6–7)

Those wicked spirits were sent to the abyss because they overstepped the boundaries of God's tolerance. They filled the earth with their wretchedness to such an extent that not even 120 years of Noah's preaching convinced anyone beyond his family to repent, believe in God, and escape His judgment. Since that time, the demons who committed such heinous sins had been bound and imprisoned when Jesus died at Calvary. Perhaps by then they thought He had lost the upper hand over them, but such was not the case. Instead He appeared in their midst and proclaimed His triumph. Colossians 2:15 declares, "When [God] had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through [Christ]."

Peter's point is riveting and dramatic—believers will suffer "for the sake of righteousness" (3:14), for doing what is right (v. 17). All suffering believers can be encouraged that such is not a disaster but rather the path to spiritual victory. The unequalled example of such triumph is the Lord Himself, who suffered unjustly and through that suffering conquered sin and the demons of hell (v. 22). God indeed uses unjust persecution mightily for His holy purposes.

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