

1 Peter 3:18-22

Ekkehardt Mueller

1 Peter 3:18-22 belongs to the more difficult passages in the NT. It has received various interpretations throughout church history. Some have concluded from this passage that there is an immortal soul, that people have a second chance of salvation after death, and/or that Jesus descended into hell and came up again. Others have questioned these interpretations.

I. Context

The first epistle of Peter contains a strong emphasis on suffering. The term *paschō* (to suffer) appears twelve times in the epistle and the term *pathēmata* (suffering) four times. No NT document uses the word family “suffering” more frequently than 1 Peter. The topic of suffering is found in all five chapters. But Peter also presents the Christian hope (e.g., 1:3) and stresses exemplary Christian behavior and conduct (e.g., 2:15; 3:1-2). He wants to encourage his audience to live a holy life in spite of suffering, knowing that Christians have a wonderful hope.

The epistle contains several christological passages which can motivate Christians to follow Jesus even under difficult circumstances. In 1:18-19 they are told that they were redeemed by the blood of Jesus. The passage 2:21-25 stresses that Jesus suffered for them, bore their sins, and healed them. Now He is their shepherd and bishop. Therefore, they should die to sin and live to righteousness. Another important christological section is the passage under investigation. While the first two passages emphasize how Jesus suffered and remind the reader that Jesus brought about salvation, the third passage points to the far-reaching consequences of salvation and stresses Jesus’ kingship.

II. Textual Analysis

1 Peter 3:18-22 is preceded and followed by a paragraph dealing with suffering. Therefore, it is very appropriate that Jesus is introduced as the one who has also suffered and was even put to death “so that He might bring us to God.” Jesus is an example of suffering unjustly. Yet he is also Savior and King, who has been glorified, as His followers one day will be.

1. Structure of the Passage

“For Christ also suffered once 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 . . . who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him”(3:18,22). Verse 18 refers to Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection. Verse 21b again mentions the resurrection. Verse 22 continues and reports about Jesus’ ascension and his reign. So verses 18, 21b and 22 form a parenthesis in which another section is inserted. While verse 18 stresses more strongly the earthly part of the life of Jesus, verses 21b and 22 deal with the heavenly aspect. The insertion mentions Jesus’ proclamation (verses 19-20) and salvation

through baptism (verse 21). These concepts are connected through the terms “Noah” and “water.” The passage as a whole tells believers: Since Jesus has done so much for you—He has saved you and He now reigns—do not get discouraged or desperate if you have to suffer. In Christ you belong to the side that has gained the victory.

2. *The First Part of the Parenthesis: Jesus’ on Earth (verse 18)*¹

Verse 18 contains two pairs of contrasts: “the righteous” vs. “the unrighteous” and “put to death in the flesh” vs. “made alive in the spirit.” The term “for” connects this passage to the preceding verses and furnishes a reason why Christians should conduct themselves as suggested in chapter 3. Verse 18 maintains that in Jesus God has taken the initiative for humankind’s salvation. He has solved the sin problem. Jesus has suffered² for sins; the righteous has died for the unrighteous. He became a substitute for humans, and yet He himself was innocent. Jesus has suffered once for all for sins. His suffering and death are unique and unrepeatable.

He was “put to death in the flesh and was made alive in the spirit.” What do these expressions “flesh” and “spirit” mean? They remind Bible students of 1 Peter 4:6; Romans 1:3-4; 9:5; and 1 Timothy 3:16: Jesus was born as a descendant of David according to the flesh. They bring to mind 1 Corinthians 15:44-45: “It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. . .” The expression “flesh” talks about the earthly sphere of Jesus’ existence while the expression “spirit” refers to his heavenly dimension.³ Jesus died according to His earthly existence, but He was raised according to his spiritual existence. In both cases “flesh” and “spirit” depict the whole Christ looked at from different perspectives. Jesus has suffered in order to lead us to God.

3. *The Insertion (verses 19-21)*

a. *Proclamation to the Spirits (verses 19-20)*

Verse 19 begins with *en hō* oftentimes translated “in which” or “through/by whom.” There are four possibilities to interpret this phrase: (1) It refers to “spirit” in the preceding verse (“in which”); (2) it refers to the entire verse 18 (“under these circumstances”); (3) it has a temporal meaning (“on which occasion”); and (4) it is a relative causal conjunction (“for which reason”). Because *en hō* follows so closely “made alive in the spirit” the first possibility is preferable.

Who are these disobedient spirits who already lived in the time of Noah? Interpretations vary. Some suggest that they refer to those who have died in the flood or that they are disembodied human souls. Others think of fallen angels or believers during Old Testament times. The term “spirits” in the plural occurs thirty-four times in the New Testament. About twenty of these thirty-four refer to demons, two or three to angels (all in Hebrews), four to the seven spirits of God (all in Revelation), about five to human spirits, and one to spiritual gifts (in 1 Cor). According to verse 20 these spirits were disobedient. Therefore they cannot be God’s spirits, angels, or spiritual gifts. Only two options remain: They could be demons or humans. Since the expression is predominantly used for demons and rarely for humans, one can assume that the spirits are demons. There is an interesting parallel in 2 Peter 2:4-5. This passage talks about

fallen angels, i.e., demons, their abode, Noah, and salvation through the flood. Obviously, the spirits are fallen angels.

1 Peter 3:19 states “Jesus went.” Some derive from this term that Jesus went down to hell to the demons, but the Greek term *poreuomai* (to go) does not indicate that Jesus descended to hell nor is the concept of hell found in 1 Peter 3. The very same term *poreuomai* is used in verse 22: Jesus went into heaven. Here—within the same passage—it stands for his ascension. Therefore one should not talk about Jesus’ descent to hell. It is best to understand the term in the same way in both verses: Jesus ascended to heaven. During His ascension He proclaimed His message.

What is the prison? “Prison” in the Bible is not only used literally but also symbolically. Babylon became the prison of each unclean spirit—Rev 18:2. According to Revelation 20, during the Millennium, the devil is in prison. Probably it is used in a symbolic sense here too. Symbolically the angels are imprisoned and must expect judgement.

To these fallen angels the Lord speaks. The term *kērussō* normally refers to the proclamation of Jesus (Acts 9:20), the gospel (Matt 9:35), the kingdom of God (Acts 28:31), and the call to repent (Matt 4:17). The combination of “to go” and “preach” is not only found in 1 Peter 3:19, but also in the Gospel of Mark—the commission to the Twelve in Matt 10:7 and the Great Commission in Mark 16:15—and in Jonah 1:2 and 3:2 where Jonah is called to go and preach to Nineveh a message of judgment. Jesus rises from the tomb. On his way to heaven He addresses the fallen angels, the demons, and proclaims what is good news for His followers but judgement for the demons: “I, Jesus Christ, am the conqueror. I have gained the victory” (see Col 2:15). The evil powers are defeated. Jesus proclaims His triumph. He who suffered innocently is Lord of everything and everyone.

b. Salvation through Water (verse 20-21a)

God in His patience did not want anyone to perish in the flood. But although people had the necessary knowledge, only a few stepped inside the ark. So it is today. Many are lost. A few are saved. But Jesus’ victory is seen when people are saved. Noah and his family may have suffered from the ridicule and scorn of their contemporaries, but God saved them. God’s children are never alone. The topic of 1 Peter 3:18-22 is to encourage suffering Christians by reminding them: (1) Jesus is risen; (2) Jesus proclaims His triumph over the demons; and (3) Jesus saves.

The waters of the flood, which killed the ungodly, carried the ark and preserved the life of the eight humans. Noah and his family survived, because *eis hēn . . . diesōthēsan di’ hudatos*, (in which . . . were saved through water). According to Blass/Debrunner oftentimes *en* (in) should be read where *eis* (into) is found.⁴ Therefore we can translate: “in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water” taking the *di’ hudatos* (through water) instrumental rather than local. They were saved through the water. Peter’s audience had heard about spirits in verse 19, namely the demons who already in the past were disobedient. In verse 20 these are contrasted with “souls,” humans. Both groups are affected by Christ’s victory.

Water is destructive but also life-supporting. While it drowned Noah's contemporaries, it saved him and his family. It killed what was sinful and purified the world. So also baptism. Jesus saves us through the water of baptism. What is sinful is destroyed. A new being arises. If a person who had been baptized has to suffer and even might be killed, his or her baptism actually means victory over death and destruction. Peter says "baptism saves you." Baptism is vital. We cannot think highly enough of baptism. But it is not baptism in itself, which is to be praised, it is God's action in baptism. Therefore, Peter quickly adds "by the resurrection of Jesus Christ." Baptism is not a sacrament which works automatically, independent of the receiver. It brings salvation because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, baptism is not just an external ceremony. Through baptism the human being has been raised to newness of life. Peter talks about a good conscience. The believer has found peace with God. The sin problem has been solved. He or she has committed himself or herself to the Lord. Back then God saved Noah through the waters of the flood; today He saves us in baptism.

4. *The Second Part of the Parenthesis: Jesus' in Heaven (verse 21b-22)*

Jesus at the right hand of God is not only found in 1 Peter 3:22 but also in Romans 8:34 where it is said that he intercedes for us. This is very important for suffering and persecuted Christians. They do not only need a glorified Lord but also one that intercedes for them. The passage under investigation reaches its climax in the universal reign of Christ. All angels and powers and authorities, negative as well as positive, are subjected to him. He reigns with universal power, He is the king.

Christ's resurrection is followed by His ascension. This in turn is followed by His enthronement. The ascension is important for the church, because it reminds her of the words of the angels that He will return and take His people with him. 1 Peter 3:18-22 concludes with a depiction of Jesus' triumph, victory, and dominion, a concept that will be repeated in 4:11 and 5:11.

¹Commentaries that can be consulted include Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 239-274; and J. Ramsey. Michaels, *1 Peter*. Word Biblical Commentary 49 (Waco: Word Books, Publisher, 1988), 194-222.

²The reading "suffered" is to be preferred to the reading "died," although it includes death.

³Cf. 1 Pet 4:6 where a similar statement is made about other humans referring to their earthly existence and their immortal resurrection bodies.

⁴Friedrich Blass and Albert Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 110, state: "No NT writer except Mt. is entirely free from the replacement of *en* by *eis* in a local sense." In 1 Pet 5:12 a second case is found within the same document.