

1 Peter 3:19

by John Gill

The sermon explores the meaning of 1 Peter 3:19, clarifying misconceptions about Christ's preaching to spirits in prison and emphasizing the importance of obedience to the Gospel.

Scripture: Genesis 6:3, Matthew 12:41, Luke 16:22-23, John 8:58, Romans 10:14-15, Ephesians 2:17, Hebrews 1:2, 1 Peter 3:19, 2 Peter 2:5, Revelation 20:7

Topics: "The Nature of Salvation", "Christ's Preaching"

Description

John Gill explores 1 Peter 3:19, discussing the various interpretations of Christ's preaching to the spirits in prison. He argues against the notion that Christ's human soul descended to hell or a place called 'Limbus Patrum' to save the Old Testament saints, emphasizing that the text refers to Christ's divine nature and the spirits of the disobedient. Gill concludes that the passage likely refers to Christ preaching through Noah to the people of his time, who ultimately faced judgment for their disobedience. He highlights that Christ existed in his divine nature before his incarnation and actively fulfilled his role as Mediator even in the Old Testament. The sermon underscores the continuity of the Gospel message throughout biblical history.

Transcript

Ver. 19. By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison. Various are the senses given of this passage: some say, that Christ, upon his death, went in his human soul to hell; either, as some, to preach to the devils and damned spirits, that they might be saved, if they would; and, as others, to let them know that he was come, and to fill them with dread and terror; but though hell may be meant by the prison, yet the text does not say that he went unto it, or preached in it; only that the spirits were in it, to whom he sometimes went, and preached; nor is his human soul, but his divine nature meant, by the Spirit, by which he went and preached to them: and as for the ends proposed, the former is impracticable and impossible; for after death follows judgment, which is an eternal one; nor is there any salvation, or hope of salvation afterwards; and the latter is absurd, vain, and needless.

Others, as the Papists, imagine the sense to be, that Christ, at his death, went in his human soul, into a place they call "Limbus Patrum", which they suppose is meant by the prison here, and delivered the souls of the Old Testament saints and patriarchs from thence, and carried them with him to heaven; but this sense is also false, because, as before observed, not the human soul of Christ, but his divine nature, is designed by the Spirit; nor is there any such place as here feigned, in which the souls of Old Testament

saints were, before the death of Christ; for they were in peace and rest, in the kingdom of heaven, in Abraham's bosom, inheriting the promises, and not in a prison; besides, the text says not one word of the delivering of these spirits out of prison, only of Christ's preaching to them: add to all this, and which Beza, with others, observes, the apostle speaks of such as had been disobedient, and unbelievers; a character which will not agree with righteous men, and prophets, and patriarchs, under the former dispensation: others think the words are to be understood of Christ's going to preach, by his apostles, to the Gentiles, as in Eph 2:17 who were in a most miserable condition, strangers to the covenants of promise, and destitute of the hope of salvation, and sat in darkness, and the shadow of death, and, as it were, at the gates of hell; were in the bonds of iniquity, and dead in sin, and had been for long time past foolish and disobedient, serving divers lusts and pleasures, to which they were in bondage.

This is, indeed, a more tolerable sense than the former; but it will be difficult to show, that men, in the present state of life, are called "spirits", which seems to be a word that relates to the souls of men, in a separate state from their bodies; and especially that carnal and unconverted men are ever so called; and besides, the apostle is speaking of such who were disobedient in the times of Noah; and therefore not of the Gentiles, in the times of the apostles: add to which, that the transition from the times of the apostles, according to this sense, to the days of Noah, is very unaccountable; this sense does not agree with the connection of the words: others are of opinion, that this is meant of the souls of the Old Testament saints, who were en fulakh, "in a watch", as they think the phrase may be rendered, instead of "in prison": and said to be in such a situation, because they were intent upon the hope of promised salvation, and were looking out for the Messiah, and anxiously desiring his coming, and which he, by some gracious manifestation, made known unto them: but though the word may sometimes signify a watch, yet more commonly a prison, and which sense best suits here; nor is that anxiety and uneasiness, which represents them as in a prison, so applicable to souls in a state of happiness; nor such a gracious manifestation so properly called preaching; and besides, not believers, but unbelievers, disobedient ones, are here spoken of; and though it is only said they were sometimes so, yet to what purpose should this former character be once mentioned of souls now in glory? but it would be tedious to reckon up the several different senses of this place; some referring it to such in Noah's time, to whom the Gospel was preached, and who repented; and though they suffered in their bodies, in the general deluge, yet their souls were saved; whereas the apostle calls them all, "the world of the ungodly", 2Pe 2:5 and others, to the eight souls that were shut up in the ark, as in a prison, and were saved; though these are manifestly distinguished in the text from the disobedient spirits.

The plain and easy sense of the words is, that Christ, by his Spirit, by which he was quickened, went in the ministry of Noah, the preacher of righteousness, and preached both by words and deeds, by the personal ministry of Noah, and by the building of the ark, to that generation who was then in being; and who being disobedient, and continuing so, a flood was brought upon them which destroyed them all; and whose spirits, or separate souls, were then in the prison of hell, so the Syriac version renders it, lwyvb, "in hell", see Re 20:7 when the Apostle Peter wrote this epistle; so that Christ neither went into this prison, nor preached in it, nor to spirits that were then in it when he preached, but to persons alive in the days of Noah, and who being disobedient, when they died, their separate souls were put into prison, and there they were when the apostle wrote: from whence we learn, that Christ was, that he existed in his divine nature before he was incarnate, he was before Abraham, he was in the days of Noah; and that Christ also, under the Old Testament, acted the part of a Mediator, in his divine nature, and by his Spirit discharged that branch of it, his prophetic office, before he appeared in human nature; and that the Gospel was preached in those early times, as unto Abraham, so before him.

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