

What about...1 Peter 3:19,20?

1 Peter 3:19,20 are considered by many Biblical scholars as one of the most difficult verses in the New Testament to interpret. Together with [Acts 2:27](#) (Acts 2:27 was discussed in the previous chapter), 1 Peter 3:19,20 is used by many Christians as proof that while Jesus' body was dead and in the grave, his soul went into Hades to preach to either the souls of those who had died or to fallen angels/evil spirits imprisoned there. These verses are also used by the Roman Catholic Church as proof of Purgatory's existence. Along with these views are multiple scenarios such as Christ was there to give people a second chance or to take some of them to heaven with him or to proclaim his triumph and announce that their condemnation was final. I don't want to get sidetracked, the issue for this writing is whether these verses indicate there are conscious souls in Hades (also referred to as Hell by some Bible translations) and whether Christ/his soul actually preached in Hades while his body lay dead in the tomb.

18 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; 19 in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits *now* in prison, 20 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 (New American Standard Bible)

Verse 19 says, “**in which** (i.e. by or in the spirit --- a continuation from verse 18) **also he** (Christ --- also a continuation from verse 18)) **proclaimed** (or preached) **to the spirits *now*** (*now* does not appear in the Greek text. It is an addition by the translators in an attempt to make the verse agree with their interpretation) **in prison.**” Verse 20 explains that these spirits were disobedient during the time when Noah was constructing the ark and God was patiently waiting. These “spirits in prison” are generally viewed one of two ways. They are fallen angels or evil spirits imprisoned in caves of darkness as described in the second letter of Peter [see [2 Peter 2:4](#)] or they are the souls in Hell of those who perished in the flood.

Let's look first at the idea that these “spirits in prison” were evil spirits or fallen angels (angels are called “spirits” in [Hebrews 1:7&14](#)) that sinned during the

time Noah was building the ark. Genesis 6:2 describes the, “sons of God” marrying the “daughters of men,” in the time of Noah. [see [Genesis 6:2-4](#)] Some view these “sons of God,” as angels of God that married and had sexual relations with mortal women. This interpretation adds controversy on top of already controversial verses. Jesus said that heavenly angels don't marry [see [Matthew 22:30](#)]. I would think that since angels are spirit beings they would not have the physical anatomy to procreate. I suppose though, one could argue that while heavenly angels don't marry, maybe they could if they disobeyed God. But wait, it gets stranger yet. The Greek word translated “Hell” in [2 Peter 2:4](#) is “Tartarus.” Originally to the Greeks, [Tartarus](#) was a place in the underworld much deeper than Hades that held many of the Titans (gods) and mythical monsters and giants; and in the only instance Tartarus appears in the Bible it is a holding place for spirit beings awaiting punishment. In Genesis 6 the children of these “sons of God” and mortal women were mighty warriors; which sounds eerily similar to stories of Greek heroes like [Heracles](#) ([Hercules to the Romans](#)) the son of the Greek god Zeus and the mortal Alcmene. In later Greek thought Tartarus evolved to become a place of punishment for wicked persons. So Jesus, in this interpretation proclaimed a message to these fallen angels in Tartarus which is part of the underworld, but as far as I can tell it is separate from Hades where Jesus' soul was said to be in [Acts 2:27](#). Using pagan descriptions, if Jesus was in Hades he could not have been in Tartarus to preach to fallen angels. It would be difficult to know if the same conclusion could be drawn based on the biblical meaning. The problem being, the usage of Tartarus in 2 Peter 2:4 is the only instance in the Bible. Its biblical meaning is more than extremely vague, so we must draw on non-biblical sources. We've already seen the problem with using non-biblical sources when the Greek word “Hades” is substituted for the Hebrew word “Sheol.” While “Hades” is the proper Greek translation of the Hebrew word “Sheol,” it has addition meanings tied to paganism. Sheol is the “grave” generally or figuratively were the dead are buried, it was never an underworld of disembodied beings that had consciousness like the pagan “Hades”. Remember [Acts 2:27](#) which describes Jesus soul in Hades is actually a quote of [Psalms 16:10](#) where it was predicted Jesus would not be left in the grave (Sheol) not the underworld, which is exactly how Paul interpreted Psalms 16:10 when he referenced it in [Acts 13:29-36](#). That alone should eliminate the possibility that Jesus' “soul” was preaching in the underworld while his body lay in the grave. Another issue with this view is there

is no instance in the bible where the angels are actually said to be “sons of God.” In fact [Hebrews 1:5](#) says God has never said to any of the angels, “You are my son.”

Now, let's look at the second viewpoint that these “spirits in prison,” were actually the souls of people who died in the flood. To help explain the basis for this view a little background information from Peter's second letter is helpful. Peter said the prophets spoke from God as they were inspired by the Holy Spirit [see [2 Peter 1:21](#)]. Noah was called a preacher of righteousness [see [2 Peter 2:5](#)]. While the Hebrew Scriptures do not specifically say Noah was a prophet who warned the world of the judgment to come, according to Jewish tradition, he did. Undoubtedly, anybody with a boat that big in his driveway would attract a lot of attention. Also, it is certainly consistent with the character for God to give people a chance to repent. So in 1 Peter 3:19,20 instead of Christ himself preaching by the spirit as in the former view, it was Christ preaching by the spirit through Noah (as God inspired the prophets to speak his words) to those living in his day as he built the ark and warned them of the judgment to come. This view attempts to correlate “spirits in prison,” with those that lived in the time of Noah by saying at the time Peter wrote this they were disembodied spirits in the prison of Hades awaiting judgment. To make sure that interpretation is conveyed to the reader, some translators add the word, “now” making 1 Peter 3:19 read, “...spirits *now* in prison,” as in the quotation from the *New American Standard Bible* at the beginning of this chapter. It is important to realize that in most bibles words in *italics* mean the words do not appear in the original manuscripts and are an addition by the translators. A basic problem I have with this view, is that the bible never mentions the human spirit being in Hades or Sheol; also the bible never equates the human spirit with the soul. Another issue which I find strange with this interpretation is; why would Jesus only preach to those who lost their lives in the flood?

Let's look again at the second letter of Peter. After contrasting Noah and his family with the ungodly destroyed in the flood; and Lot with the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah destroyed by fire; Peter points to these as examples that the Lord knows how to rescue the godly and to “**hold**” the unrighteous for punishment on the day of judgment [see [2 Peter 2:9](#)]. In [2 Peter 2:4](#) notice that the angels that sinned were being “**held**” for judgment. The Greek verb translated “**hold**” and “**held**” in these verses besides meaning to keep or to maintain also has the meaning, to hold in custody, to watch over or to guard as

in a prison. This is an important distinction to consider when interpreting 1 Peter 3:19,20. Here [2 Peter 2:5,9](#) definitely identifies the ungodly people of Noah's day as an example of those being held for judgment. This is an example of the bible interpreting itself. The angels are mentioned separately in verse four with no relation to the time of Noah.

So what do we do with the phrase, "spirits in prison" if it does not refer to the current condition of those that died during the flood. Some try to say that it refers to the spiritual condition of those held captive by sin in Noah's time. True, they were held captive by sin, but that is not the same as being, "held for judgment" by God as [2 Peter 2:9](#) states. I'd like to explore a completely different approach. Suppose 1 Peter 3:19,20 read,

19 in which also He went and preached to those imprisoned *like* the spirits [or angels], 20 to those who were disobedient, while God patiently kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, Only a few people—eight in all—were brought safely through *the* water. (my translation)

This translation portrays the similar condition of the angels/spirits and those people who disobeyed God in the time of Noah. Both are being held for judgment and destruction. I believe when Peter mentioned the, "spirits in prison," he was talking about the angels/spirits who disobeyed God before the time of Noah, whom he imprisoned to await judgment; and was drawing a parallel between them being held for judgment and the inhabitants of the earth in Noah's day being held for judgment. Without the portrayal of the angels/spirits being held in prison awaiting judgment it would not have been as obvious that God was essentially doing the same thing with the inhabitants of the earth before the flood. It is interesting that in the second letter of Peter we see this very same order; first the mention of angels in gloomy pits or caves (similar to the prisons or dungeons of Peter's day) then the inhabitants of the earth during the time of Noah [see [2 Peter 2:4,5](#)] as Peter expounds on the concept that they were both being held by God awaiting judgment. Most importantly, in second Peter the angels and the inhabitants of the earth during the time of Noah are two separate subjects. This clearly illustrates that the imprisoned angels/spirits and those disobedient in the time of Noah mentioned in first Peter should also be considered separately. While the two are related in condition (i.e. being held for judgment) the two should not be combined as most translations of 1 Peter 3:19,20 do when they refer to the "imprisoned angels/spirits who were disobedient during the time of Noah." 1Peter 3:19,20 and 2 Peter 2:4,5 are what

I would call companion verses. They help explain the meaning of each other. Without considering both it would be easy to go off on some wild speculative tangent. As such, it is very important to note that in Second Peter the examples of wicked people being held or reserved for the judgment in Noah's time and those in the days of Lot (2 Peter 2:6) was on the earth **before** they lost their lives in a judgment from God. These verses describe the angels in Tartarus, but say nothing about dead people or their souls being there. This is an excellent example of the Bible interpreting itself.