



# THOMAS HALE MINISTRIES

An Apostolic Multiplier

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## Hell and the Sufferings of Christ

### Commentary Study

Hodge, C. (1997). Systematic theology (Vol. 2, pp. 615-626). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

#### His Death and Burial

Christ humbled Himself even unto death, and continued under the power of death for a time. The reality of Christ's death has never been disputed among Christians. Some modern rationalists, unwilling to admit a miraculous resurrection, endeavoured to show that death was not in his case actually consummated, but that He was deposited in an unconscious state in the tomb. In answer to the arguments of rationalists, certain Christian writers have taken the trouble to demonstrate, from the facts stated in the account of the crucifixion, that it was not a swoon, but actual death which occurred. We are raised above such question by believing the inspiration of the New Testament. In the apostolic writings the death of Christ is so often asserted and assumed that the fact cannot be doubted by any who admit the infallible authority of those writings.

Under the clause, "He continued under the power of death for a time," is intended to be expressed all that is meant by ancient creeds which asserted "He descended into hell." Such at least is the view presented in our standards in accordance with the teachings of the majority of the Reformed theologians.

That the sufferings of Christ ceased the moment He expired on the cross, is plain from John 19:30, where it is recorded, "When Jesus had received the vinegar, he said, It is finished (Τετέλειται): and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost." This is universally admitted. As, however, such passages as Psalms 18:5, and 116:3, "The sorrows of death" (Hebrew Sheol in Psalm 18:5), were understood to mean extreme suffering, many of the Reformed understood the descensus ad inferos to refer to the extreme agony of our Lord in the garden and upon the cross, under the hiding of his Father's face. But, in the first place, the literal meaning of those passages is, "The bands (not the sorrows) of Sheol, or (as it is in Psalms 116:3), of death." The allusion in both cases is the familiar one to a net. The idea is that the Psalmist felt himself so entangled that death appeared inevitable. This is something very different from what is meant by "descending into Hell or Sheol." And in the second place, the position which the clause in question holds in the creed forbids this interpretation. It follows the

clause referring to the death and burial of Christ. It is the natural exegesis of the words immediately preceding it. “He was crucified, dead, and buried, he descended into Sheol,” i.e., he passed into the invisible state. But it would be utterly incongruous to say, “He was dead, buried, and suffered extreme agony,” when it is admitted that his sufferings ended upon the cross.

In the larger Westminster Catechism, it is said, “Christ’s humiliation after his death consisted in his being buried, and continuing in the state of the dead, and under the power of death till the third day, which hath been otherwise expressed in these words, He descended into hell.” That this is the correct view of Christ’s descensus ad inferos may be argued,—

1. From the original and proper meaning of the Greek word ᾗδης, and the corresponding English word hell. Both mean the unseen world. The one signifies what is unseen, the other what is covered and thus hidden from view. Both are used as the rendering for the Hebrew word שאול (probably from אלש to ask, or demand), the state or place of the dead; the orcus rapax of the Latins. All the dead, the righteous and the wicked, alike go into the invisible world, or, in this sense, “descend into hell.” Hence to be buried, to go down to the grave, to descend into hell, are in Scriptural language equivalent forms of expression. In Genesis 37:35, Jacob says ארד שאולה, which the Septuagint renders καταβήσομαι εἰς ᾗδου; the Vulgate, Descendam in infernum; the English, “I will go down into the grave.” Thus also in Psalm 30:3, David says, הֶעֱלִיתַּ מִן־שְׂאוֹל כַּפְּשִׁי, which the Septuagint renders, ἀνήγαγες ἐξ ᾗδου τὴν ψυχὴν μου; the Vulgate, “Eduxisti ab inferno animam meam;” and so Luther, “Du hast meine Seele aus der Hölle geführt;” while the English version is, “Thou hast brought up my soul from the grave,” which is explained in the following clause, “Thou hast kept me alive, that I should not go down to the pit.” In Scriptural language, therefore, to descend into Hades or Hell, means nothing more than to descend to the grave, to pass from the visible into the invisible world, as happens to all men when they die and are buried.

2. This view is confirmed by the fact that these words were not in the creed originally. They were introduced in the fourth century, and then not as a separate or distinct article, but as merely explanatory. “He was dead and buried,” i.e., he descended into hell. That the two clauses were at first considered equivalent is obvious, because some copies of the creed had the one form, some the other, and some both, though all were intended to say the same thing.

3. The passages of Scripture which are adduced to prove that Christ descended into hell in a sense peculiar to Himself, do not teach that doctrine. In Psalm 16:10, “Thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thy Holy One to see corruption,” merely expresses the confidence of the speaker that God would not leave him under the power of death. ‘Thou wilt not deliver me to the power of Sheol, nor suffer me to see corruption.’ This is the precise sense ascribed to the passage by St. Peter in Acts 2:27-31, and by St. Paul in Acts 13:34, 35. In both cases the Psalm is quoted to prove the resurrection of Christ. David was left in the state of the dead; his body did see corruption. Christ was delivered from the grave before corruption had time to affect his sacred person. My soul (נַפְשִׁי), may be taken here, as so often elsewhere, for the personal pronoun, as in the passage quoted above. Psalm 30:3: “Thou hast brought up my soul (me) from the grave.” See Psalm 3:2, “Many there be which say of my soul (me), there

is no help for him in God.” Psalm 7:3, “Lest he tear my soul (me) like a lion.” Psalm 11:1, “How say ye to my soul (to me) Flee as a bird to your mountain.” Psalm 35:7, “A pit which without cause they have digged for my soul (for me).” But even if the words “my soul” be taken in their strict sense, the meaning is still the same. The souls of men at death pass into the invisible world, they are hidden from the view and companionship of men. This condition was to continue in the case of Christ only for a few days. He was to be recalled to life. His soul was to be reunited to his body, as it was before.

A second passage relied upon in this matter is Ephesians 4:9, “Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth?” By “the lower parts of the earth” many understand the parts lower than the earth; the lower, or infernal regions. But in the first place, this is altogether an unnecessary interpretation. The words may naturally mean here, as elsewhere, the lower parts, namely, the earth; the genitive τῆς τῆς being the genitive of opposition. See Isaiah 44:23, “Sing, O ye heavens; ... shout, ye lower parts the earth.” In the second place, the context neither here nor in Psalm 68 whence the passage is taken, or on which the Apostle is commenting, suggests any other contrast than that between heaven and earth. ‘He that ascended to heaven, is he who first descended to the earth.’ In the third place, the Apostle’s object does not render either necessary or probable any reference to what happened after the death of Christ. He simply says that the Psalm (68) which speaks of the triumph of its subject must be understood of the Messiah because it speaks of an ascension to heaven, which implies a previous descent to the earth.

Much less can 1 Timothy 3:16, where it said of God as manifest in the flesh that He was “seen of angels,” be understood of Christ appearing in the under-world in the presence of Satan and his angels. The word ἄγγελοι, angels, without qualification, is never used of fallen angels. The Apostle refers to the evidence afforded of the divinity of Christ; He was justified by the Spirit, seen and recognized by angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed upon in the world, and received up into glory. All classes of beings had been the witnesses of the fact that God was manifested in the flesh.

Much the most difficult and important passage bearing on this question is 1 Peter 3:18, 19, “Being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: by which also he went and preached to the spirits in prison.” The English version is an exposition, as well as a translation of the passage. As the words stand in our Bible they afford no ground for the doctrine that Christ after death went into hell and preached to the spirits there confined. The Greek is, θανατωθεὶς μὲν σαρκί, ζωοποιηθεὶς δὲ πνεύματι, ἐν ᾧ καὶ τοῖς ἐν φυλακῇ πνεύμασι πορευθεὶς ἐκήρυξεν. If in this passage σαρκί means the body, and πνεύματι, the soul; if the dative is to have the same force in both clauses; and if ζωοποιηθεὶς be taken to mean preserved alive; then the natural interpretation undoubtedly is, ‘Being put to death as to the body, but continuing alive as to the soul, in which having gone he preached to the spirits in prison.’ However different the views entertained as to what spirits are here meant, whether the spirits of living men in spiritual bondage; or the evil spirits of the dead; or the spirits of the faithful of former generations, still detained in Hades; the passage must, in this view, be understood to teach that Christ preached after his death, and if so, to the spirits of the dead. This is the interpretation which has been extensively adopted in all ages of the Church. The principal argument in its favour is that when σῶμα and πνεῦμα are placed in antithesis, if the former mean the body the latter must mean the soul. In the present case as Christ’s death is spoken of, and as it was only the body that

died, it is urged that σαρκί must refer to the body. The objections, however, to this interpretation are very serious.

1. When Christ is the subject the antithesis between σάρξ and πνεῦμα is not necessarily that between the body and soul. It may be between the human and the divine nature. So in Romans 1:3, it is said, He was the son of David κατὰ σάρκα, as to his human nature; but the Son of God κατὰ πνεῦμα, as to his divine nature.

2. The word ζωοποιέω never means to continue in life, but always to impart life. Therefore to render ζωοποιηθείς, being preserved alive, is contrary to the proper meaning of the word. It is moreover opposed to the antithesis between that word and θανατωθείς; as the one expresses the idea of the infliction of death, the other expresses that of vivifying. 'He was put to death as to his humanity, or as a man; but was quickened by the Spirit, or divine nature, energy or power that resided in his person.' He had power to lay down his life, and He had power to take it again.

3. The difference between the force of the two datives is justified and determined by the meaning of the participles with which σαρκί and πνεύματι are connected. 'He was put to death as to the flesh; he was made alive by the Spirit.' The one word demands one force of the dative, and the other a different, but equally legitimate sense.

4. Another objection to the interpretation above mentioned is, that it makes the passage teach a doctrine contrary to the analogy of faith. Whenever Christ is spoken of as preaching, in all cases in which the verb κηρύσσειν is used, it refers to making proclamation of the gospel. If, therefore, this passage teaches that Christ, after his death and before his resurrection, preached to spirits in prison, it teaches that He preached the gospel to them. But according to the faith of the whole Church, Latin, Lutheran, and Reformed, the offer of salvation through the gospel is confined to the present life. It is certainly a strong objection to an interpretation of any one passage that it makes it teach a doctrine nowhere else taught in the Word of God, and which is contrary to the teachings of that Word, as understood by the universal Church. For such reasons as these the authors of our standards have discarded the doctrine of a descensus ad inferos in any other sense than a departure into the invisible state. The meaning of the whole passage as given by Beza is in accordance with the doctrine of the Reformed Church. "Christus, inquit [apostolus], quem dixi virtute vivificatum, jam olim in diebus Noe, quum appareretur arca, profectus sive adveniens, e cœlo videlicet, ne nunc primum putemus illum ecclesiæ curam et administrationem suscepisse adveniens, inquam, non corpore (quod nondum assumpserat), sed ea ipsa virtute, per quam postea resurrexit, prædicavit spiritibus illis, qui nunc in carcere meritas dant pœnas, utpote qui recta monenti Noe ... parere olim recusarint."

The majority of modern interpreters adopt the old interpretation. Bretschneider expresses the sense of the passage thus: "As God once through Noah exhorted men to repentance, and threatened to bring upon them the flood, as a punishment, so Jesus preached redemption, or announced the completion of the work of atonement, to the souls of men in Hades." According to others the souls to whom Christ preached were those who in the days of Noah had rejected the offers of mercy.

According to the Lutherans Christ after his death descended to the abode of evil spirits, not to preach the gospel, but to triumph over Satan and despoil him of his power.

### **The Romish Doctrine of the “Descensus ad Inferos”**

The Romanists teach that the department of Hades to which Christ descended, was not the abode of evil spirits, but that in which dwelt the souls of believers who died before the advent of the Redeemer, and that the object of his descent was neither to preach the gospel, nor to despoil Satan, but to deliver the pious dead from the intermediate state in which they then were (called the *Limbus patrum*), and to introduce them into heaven. These were the captives which, according to Ephesians 4:8, He led in triumph when He ascended on high after his resurrection. This doctrine not only has no Scriptural foundation, but it rests on an unscriptural theory as to the efficacy of the truth and ordinances as revealed and ordained under the old dispensation. Believing, as the Church of Rome does, that saving grace is communicated only through the Christian sacraments, Romanists are constrained to believe that there was no real remission of sin, or sanctification, before the institution of the Christian Church. The sacraments of the Old Testament, they say simply signified grace, while those of the New actually convey it. This being the case, believers dying before the coming of Christ were not really saved, but passed into a state of negative existence, neither of suffering nor of happiness, from which it was the object of Christ’s descent into Hades to deliver them. The above are only a few of the speculations in which theologians in all ages of the Church have indulged as to the nature and design of the *descensus ad inferos* in which all profess to believe. Whole volumes have been devoted to this subject.

### **The Views of Lutherans and of Modern Theologians on the Humiliation of Christ**

As the Lutherans at the time of the Reformation departed from the faith of the Church on the person of Christ, they were led into certain peculiarities of doctrine on other related subjects. Insisting, as Luther did, on the local presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist, he was constrained to believe that Christ as to his human nature was everywhere present. This involved the assumption that, in virtue of the hypostatical union, the attributes of the divine, were communicated to his human nature, so that Christ’s human soul was omniscient, almighty, and omnipresent. And as this communication of attributes took place from the very beginning, the human nature of Christ from the commencement of its existence, was endowed with all divine perfections. Yet not only in infancy, but throughout the whole of his earthly pilgrimage, He appeared, except on rare occasions, as an ordinary man, possessed as a man of no attributes which did not belong to other men. His miracles of knowledge and power were occasional manifestations of what as a man He really was, as those miracles were effects produced, not by his divine nature or *Logos*, nor by the Holy Spirit with which his humanity was endowed without measure, but by his human nature itself. His humiliation, therefore, consisted mainly and essentially in his voluntarily abstaining from the exercise and manifestation of the divine attributes with which his humanity was endowed and imbued.

In the seventeenth century there was an earnest and protracted dispute among the Lutherans as to the question, whether the humiliation of Christ was a mere *κρύψις* (or concealing) of the divine majesty of his human nature; or whether it was an actual *κένωσις*, an emptying himself for the time

being of the divine attributes which belonged to his humanity in virtue of the hypostatical union. According to the former view, Christ, as man, was from the moment of his conception, everywhere present, omnipotent, and omniscient, and actually in his human nature governed the universe. The only difference, therefore, between the state of humiliation and that of exaltation, concerns the mode in which this universal dominion was exercised. While on earth it was in a way not to be apparent and recognized; whereas after his ascension, it was open and avowed. According to the opposite view both these points were denied. That is, while it was admitted that the human nature was entitled to these divine attributes and prerogatives, from the moment of its conception, nevertheless it is said that they were not claimed or exercised while He was on earth; and therefore during his humiliation although there was a κτῆσις or possession of the attributes, yet there was not the χρῆσις of them, and consequently during that period He was not as man omnipresent, omniscient, and everywhere dominant. The exaltation, therefore, was not a mere change in the mode of exercising his divine prerogatives, but an entering on their use as well as on their manifestation. The theologians of Tübingen maintained the former view, those of Giessen the latter. The question having been referred to the Saxon theologians they decided substantially in favour of the latter doctrine, and this was the view generally adopted by the Lutheran divines. The precise point of dispute between the parties was “An homo Christus in Deum assumtus in statu exinanitionis tanquam rex præsens cuncta licet latenter gubernarit?” This the one party affirmed and the other denied. The one made omnipresence and dominion the necessary consequence of the hypostatical union; the other, while admitting the actual potential possession of the divine attributes by the human nature as a consequence of its union with the divine, regarded their use as dependent on the divine will. It is conceivable that power should be dependent on the will, and therefore in relation to that attribute the distinction between the possession and use might be admitted; but no such distinction is possible in reference to the attribute of omnipresence. If that perfection belonged to the human nature of Christ (to his body and soul), in virtue of the hypostatical union, it must have been omnipresent from the moment that this union was consummated. This is involved in the very statement of the doctrine of the hypostatical union as given by the Lutheran divines.

According to the Lutheran system, therefore, the subject of the humiliation was the human nature of Christ, and consisted essentially in the voluntary abstaining from the exercise and manifestation of the divine attributes with which it was imbued and interpenetrated. According to the Reformed doctrine it was He who was equal with God who emptied Himself in assuming the fashion of a man, and this divine person thus clothed in our nature humbled Himself to be obedient even unto death. It is therefore of the eternal Son of whom all that is taught of the humiliation of Christ is to be predicated. This is clearly the doctrine of the Apostle in Philippians 2:6-8. It is the person who thought it no robbery to be equal with God, of whom it is said, (1.) That He made Himself of no reputation (ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσε). (2.) That this was done by his taking upon Himself the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men. (3.) That being thus incarnate, or found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself by being obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. In this matter, as characteristically on all other points of doctrine, the Reformed Church adheres to the simple statements of the Scriptures, and abstains from the attempt to bring those doctrines within the grasp of the understanding.

The modern theologians, of whom Ebrard is a representative, in discarding the Church doctrine of two natures (in the sense of substances) in Christ, and in making the incarnation consist in a voluntary self-limitation, are necessarily led into a theory as to the humiliation of Christ at variance with both the Lutheran and Reformed views on that subject. According to this modern doctrine the Eternal Son of God did not assume a human nature, in the Church sense of those words, but He became a man. His infinite intellect was reduced to the limits of the intellect of human intelligence, to be gradually developed as in the case of other men. His omnipotence was reduced to the limits of human power. His omnipresence was exchanged for limitation to a definite portion of space. He did not, however, as stated above, when treating of the doctrine of Christ's person, cease to be God. According to this theory the incarnation resulted, as Ebrard says, "In Christ's being a man. (1.) So far as his will is concerned, in statu integritatis, i.e., as Adam was before the fall, in a state to choose between good and evil. (2.) So far as natural endowments are concerned, with all the powers pertaining to humanity, which lay undeveloped in the first Adam.... (3.) And as concerns his ability dominant over the laws of nature in the present disordered state of nature. Thus the eternal Son of God," he says, "had reduced himself, so that as God he willed, having assumed the form of man, to exert his activity only as man.... The exercise of omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, ... had been to renounce his humanity.... His act of self-limitation in thus reducing himself to the limitations of humanity, is the κένωσις; his voluntary submission to pain, shame, and death, is the ταπείνωσις spoken of by the Apostle in Philippians 2:6-8: but both are included in the wider sense of his humiliation."

Lycans, Z. (2018). Jesus' Descent into Hell. In M. Ward, J. Parks, B. Ellis, & T. Hains (Eds.), *Lexham Survey of Theology*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

The doctrine of Christ's descent teaches that during the period between his death and resurrection, Jesus descended into the realm of the dead, sharing the lot of humanity, our common fate.

The designation of Sheol (Greek, hades) as the destination of human souls after death is described in Scripture with a sense of irreversible finality (Luke 16:19-31; 23:43). Beyond this, descriptions of Hades are scant in the biblical text, with some of the only elaboration being found in Christ's parable of the rich man and Lazarus, which adds few details but serves to further reinforce the overall sense of finality. The certainty of Hades reveals an impotent humanity, unable to conquer their greatest enemy and making supplication to the living God, who alone is capable of rescuing from the grave (Pss 9:13; 86:13; Isa 38:17).

It follows then, that when Christ, having assumed true human nature, submits to death on a cross (Phil 2:8), he shares in the fate of humanity and descends with them into Hades (Heb 2:14-16). As with the nature of Hades itself, details of Christ's activity while there have scant explicit testimony in Scripture.

Outside of Scripture, testimony to the doctrine is seen fairly early on in the history of the church, with Ignatius (Trallians 9), Irenaeus (AH 1.27.3; 4.27.2), Athanasius (ep. Epic.), Cyril of Jerusalem (Catechical Lectures 4.11; 14.18), Ambrose (On the Christian Faith 3.4.28; 3.14.111), and Augustine (Ep. 164.2) all making mention of it. Further elaboration can be found in the Middle Ages in Thomas Aquinas (STh III q.52) and in the Reformation in John Calvin (Inst. 2.16.9-10, vol.1) and Martin Luther (1533 sermon at Torgau).

The key text is 1 Peter 3:18-20: "Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water." This is often coupled with 1 Peter 4:6: "For this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does." Throughout history there have been variant interpretations proposed for these texts: some have understood these passages to mean that in his descent, Christ proclaimed salvation to the souls of the Old Testament saints, while others have taken them to refer to Christ's preaching through Noah prior to the deluge.

Rather than elaborating on what the Lord was doing while in Hades, the overwhelming witness of Scripture is concerned with reiterating the idea that he truly descended to the dead (Ps 62:10; Acts 2:24-32; Heb 13:20; Eph 4:7-10; Rom 10:6-7) and was subsequently raised from the dead, thereby conquering death (2 Tim 1:10), removing its sting (1 Cor 15:55), and retaining possession of its keys (Rev 1:18). The doctrine serves to reinforce the true humanity and death of Christ, as well as his resurrection and the vindication of his ministry and divine nature.

## KEY VERSES

1 Pe 3:18-20; 1 Pe 4:6; Ro 10:6-7; Eph 4:7-10; Ps 62:10; Ac 2:24-32; Heb 13:20

Raymer, R. M. (1985). 1 Peter. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, pp. 851-852). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

*18 For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, in order that he could bring you to God, being put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, 19 in which also he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, 20 who were formerly disobedient, when the patience of God waited in the days of Noah, while\* an ark was being constructed, in which a few—that is, eight souls—were rescued through water. 21 And also, corresponding to this, baptism now saves you, not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, 22 who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, with angels and authorities and powers having been subjected to him. (1 Pe 3:18-22).*  
Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

“Through whom” can also mean “in which.” If the reference in v.18 is to two different states of Christ, then v.19 says in which state he went and preached: the state of resurrection. To whom did Christ preach? The “spirits” are best understood as fallen angels. Jesus, then, in his resurrection “goes” to the place of angelic confinement. Since this is in another realm, we cannot locate it spatially. However, there does not seem to be good evidence for seeing here a literal “descent into hell.”

What did he preach? The content of the proclamation is not stated, but Peter uses “preached” (GK 3062) rather than “proclaim good news” (GK 2294; cf. 4:6), because Christ did not announce the Gospel to the fallen angels. The thought of salvation for angels is foreign to the NT (Heb 2:16), including Peter (cf. comment on 1:12). The announcement is of Christ’s victory and of their doom that has come through his death on the cross and his resurrection.

To sum up, the thought of vv.18-19 may be paraphrased as follows: “He was put to death in the human sphere of existence but was made alive in the resurrection sphere of existence, in which state of existence he made a proclamation of his victory to the fallen angels.” As for the pastoral significance of these verses, it is one of comfort because through suffering Christians go on to victory. Those who oppose Christians will be defeated (Col 2:15; 2Th 1:6-8).

20 These fallen angels are now identified as those who were disobedient at the time of Noah. This connects with the rebellion of Ge 6:1-4 (see also 2Pe 2:4; Jude 6). Peter makes a connection between the disobedience of the spirits and the Flood-judgment. The Flood-judgment is a warning to humanity of God’s coming final judgment on the disobedient world (cf. Mt 24:37-41; 2Pe 3:3-7). The ark that saved a few through water portrays the salvation now available in Christ.

Barker, K. L. (1994). *Expositor's Bible Commentary (Abridged Edition: New Testament)* (p. 1054). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

Through whom ... He ... preached to the spirits in prison has been subject to many interpretations. Some believe Peter here referred to the descent of Christ's Spirit into hades between His death and resurrection to offer people who lived before the Flood a second chance for salvation. However, this interpretation has no scriptural support.

Others have said this passage refers to Christ's descent into hell after His crucifixion to proclaim His victory to the imprisoned fallen angels referred to in 2 Peter 2:4-5, equating them with "the sons of God" Moses wrote about (Gen. 6:1-2). Though much commends this view as a possible interpretation, the context seems more likely to be referring to humans rather than angels.

The "spirits" (pneumasin, a term usually applied to supernatural beings but also used at least once to refer to human "spirits"; cf. Heb. 12:23) are described in 1 Peter 3:20 as those who were disobedient when God waited patiently for Noah to finish building the ark. They had rebelled against the message of God during the 120 years the ark was being built. God declared He would not tolerate people's wickedness forever, but would extend His patience for only 120 more years (Gen. 6:3). Since the entire human race except Noah (Gen. 6:5-9) was evil, God determined to "wipe mankind ... from the face of the earth." The "spirits" referred to in 1 Peter 3:20 are probably the souls of the evil human race that existed in the days of Noah. Those "spirits" are now "in prison" awaiting the final judgment of God at the end of the Age.

The problem remains as to when Christ preached to these "spirits." Peter's explanation of the resurrection of Christ (3:18) "by the Spirit" brought to mind that the preincarnate Christ was actually in Noah, ministering through him, by means of the Holy Spirit. Peter (1:11) referred to the "Spirit of Christ" in the Old Testament prophets. Later he described Noah as "a preacher of righteousness" (2 Peter 2:5). The Spirit of Christ preached through Noah to the ungodly humans who, at the time of Peter's writing, were "spirits in prison" awaiting final judgment.

This interpretation seems to fit the general theme of this section (1 Peter 3:13-22)—keeping a good conscience in unjust persecution. Noah is presented as an example of one who committed himself to a course of action for the sake of a clear conscience before God, though it meant enduring harsh ridicule. Noah did not fear men but obeyed God and proclaimed His message. Noah's reward for keeping a clear conscience in unjust suffering was the salvation of himself and his family, who were saved through water, being brought safely through the Flood.

Green, J. B. (2007). 1 Peter (pp. 119-124). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

This lengthy unit brings into focus key elements of the message of 1 Peter, intricately interlacing a christology focused on Jesus' death and exaltation, a declaration of God's exercise of sovereign justice, Peter's claim for the certainty of ultimate safety for Christ's followers, and, then, encouragement to live lives congruent with those deepest commitments professed and affirmed in baptism. Harbinger of profound portraits of God (explicitly named in 3:18, 20, 21, 22; 4:2, 6) and Christ (explicitly named in 3:18, 21; 4:1), this text deploys its theological and christological affirmations in the service of assured promise: The faithful are brought safely through the calamity of life in this world as a peculiar people and through divine judgment. This assured promise warrants Peter's admonition to his audience to live (as it were) into their baptism.

Key to our understanding of this section of the letter is our making sense of the complexities of its structure. For example, it is possible to argue that 3:18-22 and 4:1-6 should be interpreted in relative isolation from one another, a case that is especially easy to make with regard to 3:18-22. This is because these verses draw significantly on traditional material,<sup>134</sup> a christological credo tracing the journey of Christ through death to exaltation. The material in vv. 18-19, 22, in particular, has strong affinity with the confession of 1 Tim 3:16: "Without any doubt, the mystery of our religion is great:

He was revealed in flesh,  
vindicated in spirit,  
seen by angels,  
proclaimed among Gentiles,  
believed in throughout the world,  
taken up in glory.

Moreover, some have found in 3:18-22 a self-contained, chiasmic structure:

- A death of Christ
- B spirits in Prison
- B' salvation of Noah and Peter's addressees
- A' resurrection of Christ

At the same time, we should not turn a blind eye to the potential effect of relocating traditional material within a larger argument, transforming it for service to a wider agenda. Even if 3:22 serves well to bring closure to the christological material begun in 3:18, Peter nonetheless moves explicitly in 4:1 to draw out the ramifications of Christ's suffering in ways that continue to intertwine the fate of Christ with that of his followers. Moreover, thoughts of the flood episode, to which 3:20 alludes, are reactivated in 4:4, where Peter refers to Gentile behavior as a "flood (ἀνάχυσις, *anachysis*) of

unrestrained immorality.” Still further, parallels between 3:18-19 and 4:6, however enigmatic, are easily recognized. Consequently, 3:18-4:6 follows this structure:

3:18a preamble: Christ’s effective death

3:18b Christ: put to death as a human but made alive by the Spirit

3:19 he preached to the spirits in prison

3:20-22 flood and baptism

4:1-2 live in accordance with the will of God

4:3-5 flood and judgment

4:6a good news proclaimed to the dead

4:6b the dead: judged as humans that they might live by the Spirit

The consequence of this inverted parallelism is to underscore the ramifications of what had already become traditional christology for the nature of Christian hope and Christian life in a world unfriendly to those whose behavior reflects their baptismal commitments. I will examine the message of this textual unit under two headings: (1) The Universal Triumph of Jesus Christ and (2) The Unique and Programmatic Suffering of Jesus.

The Universal Triumph of Jesus Christ. This is the third major christological text in 1 Peter (see also 1:18-21; 2:22-25), and it is worthy of note that it, like the other two, centers on the passion of Jesus Christ. This one, however, advances beyond the former two in its heightened emphasis on the exaltation of Jesus. Moreover, although all three passages bear witness to the sacrificial death of Jesus, this passage moves more pointedly in the direction of another model of the atonement. This is Christus Victor, that classical model of the atonement whereby the suffering and resurrection of Jesus is interpreted in terms of triumph over evil.

One of the puzzles of this text is the character of the spirits in prison to whom Christ preached (3:19), the identity of the dead to whom good news was proclaimed (4:6), and the relation between these two. Scholars have championed a range of possible identities for the imprisoned spirits of 3:19, two of which are primary. (1) These are the disembodied spirits of Noah’s contemporaries who perished in the flood and have been kept in prison in Hades. Because rabbinic tradition disallowed such persons a share in the resurrection (“The generation of the Flood have no share in the world to come” [Mishnah Sanhedrin 10.3a]), Peter’s declaration that the salvation won by Christ extended even so far as to include them would be all the more remarkable. The evangelistic role of Christ would be further underscored in 4:6. (2) The imprisoned spirits are the fallen angels of Gen 6:1-6 who were responsible for bringing upon the whole earth the Great Flood and were therefore imprisoned—at least, this is how some Jewish literature represents reflection on Gen 6:1-6. The majority view favors this second option. With regard to “the dead” of 4:6, most scholars today tend toward viewing these as believers who have died, though some argue that “the dead” are undifferentiated persons who, in death, are allowed to hear the good news. Accordingly, for most scholars, 3:19 and 4:6 are unrelated.

I will depart from the majority view by claiming both that Peter's message is more integrated into his letter than these options allow and that this text supports more than one potential referent for the "spirits" in 3:19. I will claim:

that the "spirits" of 3:19 and the "angels, authorities, and powers" of 3:22 are overlapping but not identical categories;

that "the angels, authorities, and powers" include those "powers" of all sorts, extending beyond, but not necessarily ruling out, spiritual realities, whether aligned with or (as in 3:19) against the will of God;

that the "powers" are brought into relationship to Christ not as a matter of "subjugation" but, recalling how "to subordinate" was used in Peter's household code (2:13-3:12), as finding and occupying responsibly their place in the created order;

that, taken as a whole, 3:18-4:6 assures Christians of divine judgment, entailing accountability for the disobedient and vindication of believers;

that "the dead" of 4:6 are dead members of the human family given postmortem opportunity to hear the good news; and

that this textual unit (and especially 3:18-19, 22; 4:6) extends the meaning of Jesus' lordship (from 3:12, 15) by affirming the universal exaltation of Jesus Christ in a way analogous to Phil 2:9-11: "Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Behind the "imprisoned spirits" of 3:19, most scholars find the influence of "The Book of the Watchers," a Jewish work dating from the third or early second century BC, which comprises the first 36 chapters of 1 Enoch. "Watchers" takes its name from the account of the fallen angels (or Watchers) in 1 Enoch 6-16—a story that significantly embellishes the report concerning the "sons of God" in Gen 6:1-6. Enticed by the "handsome and beautiful daughters" of the human family, the angels determined to "choose wives for ourselves from among the daughters of man and beget us children" (1 Enoch 6:1-2). Accordingly, "they took wives unto themselves ... began to go unto them ... and taught them magical medicine, incantations, the cutting of roots, and taught them (about) plants. And the women became pregnant and gave birth to great giants whose heights were three hundred cubits" (7:1-2). These giants sinned against humanity and against the earth. Though Enoch intercedes on behalf of the Watchers, God pronounces judgment on them: "From now on you will not be able to ascend into heaven unto all eternity, but you shall remain inside the earth, imprisoned all the days of eternity" (14:5). Accordingly, "spirits" in 1 Pet 3:19 refers to those Watchers, or to the giants fathered by those Watchers, and it is to them that Christ addressed himself. The propriety of this interpretation is underscored by 2 Pet 2:4-9, where we find a more highly developed but kindred thought: "For if God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of deepest darkness to be kept until the judgment; and if he did not spare

the ancient world, even though he saved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven others, when he brought a flood on a world of the ungodly; ... then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trial, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment.”

But there is more going on in this text than this interpretation allows. The “spirits” of 3:19 find their counterpart in 3:22 in a reference to “angels,” as might be anticipated in a reading that finds Watchers in the background of Peter’s claims, but also with reference to “authorities and powers.” In this context, ἄγγελος (angelos) can refer to evil spirits or to angels; “authorities” (ἐξουσία, exousia) to entities, whether human or otherwise, authorized by reason of office to exercise power; and “powers” (δύναμις, dynamis) to entities, whether human or supernatural, functioning in extraordinary ways. This is Peter’s only reference to what are widely subsumed in NT study under the heading of “powers and principalities” or simply “powers,” so it is not immediately obvious how best to understand them. Outside 1 Peter we find comparable lists, for example, in Rom 8:19-22, 38-39; 1 Cor 15:24-26; Eph 1:21; 6:12; Col 1:16; 2:9-15. From these, we can determine that the NT writers had no technical vocabulary for “the powers.” As a result, we would be well-advised to think in terms of an array of powerful agents whose particular role or level in a hierarchy of power is impossible to determine. Nor do we find commentary on the identity or essential character of these “powers,” though it is clear that with reference to them the NT writers are drawing back the curtain to reveal the spiritual dimension of what might otherwise appear to be the mundane goings-on of the world in which we live. These “powers” appear to operate on a continuum between their enfleshment in human beings and human institutions on the one hand and disembodied heavenly beings (e.g., angels and demons) on the other, suggesting that these are entities of God’s creation who animate and influence social structures and organizations with malevolent capacities and aims.