

It Happened One Weekend

Christianity 101, Part 4

1 Peter 3:18-22

Discussion Guide

Main Idea:

Jesus Christ overcame sin and death forever with his work on the cross and his resurrection during the course of one weekend two thousand years ago. In that short of a time, many things happened. Peter gives a brief description in his first letter about what Jesus did between his death and resurrection to remind his audience of the hope that they should have. Because Jesus defeated sin and death, we can have hope to help us get through our difficult times and persecution. Peter wanted to remind his hearers that their struggles were only momentary and would be well-worth enduring for the glory of Christ and the hope of the redemption for all things that comes through him.

Discussion Points:

1 Peter spends a great deal of time encouraging believers to endure hardship and persecution. Peter makes sure his audience knows that their suffering for Christ is necessary and not a result of having bad doctrine or believing something false. Suffering often comes through the will of God. In this passage, Peter gives a quick gospel synopsis in verse 18. Jesus never sinned, but suffered greatly and Peter wants to encourage his audience to see the whole picture of the gospel and not be so shortsighted.

- In reading 1 Peter 3:18, how does Peter start delivering his gospel encouragement?
- What was the reason, according to this verse, that Jesus had to suffer for sins?
- What was the result of Christ's death for us?
- Can you think of any other short summaries of the gospel in the Bible?

Peter wants to make sure he is clear that Jesus really, truly died. Over the centuries, there have been many heresies that claim Jesus did not truly die, but right away, even before many of those heresies arose, Peter clearly teaches an actual physical death of the man Jesus.

- Why is it important that Jesus was a real man?
- Why is it important to the gospel that Jesus truly died?
- What kind of phrases does Peter use in this passage to make it clear that Jesus really died?

Discussion Guide cont.

The Bible teaches about a “being absent of the body and present with the Lord” in 2 Corinthians 5:8.

- Was Jesus’ death in the flesh the same as every other person?
- Jesus’ spirit being alive and active between his death and resurrection different?

After talking about Jesus’ death, Peter moves on to talk about his descending to proclaim something to the spirits in prison. It is unclear exactly what he proclaimed or where exactly these spirits were or why they were imprisoned in the first place. There is a lot of discussion about these points, but it is fair to conclude that these spirits were demons who had been imprisoned because of their disobedience long before.

- What do verses 19-20 say about these spirits?
- Why would Jesus find the need to go proclaim something to these spirits?

These imprisoned spirits were most likely fallen angels; we also call them demons. It is important to remember that although demons are not like humans, they are not omniscient, knowing everything that happens all the time.

- What do you think Jesus went to proclaim to these spirits?
- Why was it important for him to show them that their plan had failed and they would ultimately be destroyed?

Moving from the death and resurrection of Jesus, Peter moves on to the meaning of Jesus’ resurrection, which saves us, and his ascension to the right hand of God to be given the authority over all of creation.

- What did Jesus’ resurrection prove?
- What does Jesus’ resurrection mean for us?
- Why is it important that Peter caps off this teaching with Jesus’ ascension?
- How does Jesus’ ascension give believers hope for His return?

Gospel Connection:

Jesus, the Righteous One of God, suffered and died for our sins. He took our place on the cross and paid our penalty. He proved through his death, descension, resurrection, and ascension that He was God and able to bring us into relationship with Himself and save us forever by His work alone.

Discussion Guide cont.

Practical Implications:

- Think:** Does your life reflect the hope of the gospel? Do you meditate on its truth?
- Pray:** Thank God for providing a sacrifice for your sins through Jesus. Praise Him for His sovereignty in the work He did to bring you redemption through Jesus' blood.
- Do:** Share with others how this passage gives you hope for the future because of what Jesus did.

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1 Peter 3:18-22

In high school, I had a chemistry teacher who didn't like me. At least that was my excuse for nearly failing the class. If I remember correctly, her husband was my Algebra teacher – and I did fail that.

Neither one of them liked me. Although in hindsight, I suppose I didn't like them, and that was part of the problem.

But chemistry was painful – at least for me. For one thing, you dared not ask a question; she would make you appear unintelligent. So I never asked questions, because that's what I was.

I can still remember what nearly kept me from graduating: that colorful, confusing, chart of elements, known as the Periodic Table.

Maybe you remember those days. I went back to look it up and it reads: The periodic table is a tabular arrangement of the chemical elements, ordered by their atomic number, electron configurations, and recurring chemical properties; where the ordering shows periodic trends, such as elements with similar behavior and/or approximately similar chemical properties. No wonder I was praying for the rapture!

I was supposed to learn that chart by memory as well as formulas for what happens when you mix this one with that one and that one with this one.

Had I been left alone in a chemistry lab, I would have probably burned my school to the ground. I just didn't get the picture, which in hindsight is sad, given the beauty of God's systematic ordering of the universe, including even the configurations of electrons.

But I didn't like my teacher and my attitude no doubt influenced my aptitude in the 10th grade.

Well, I happen to like the Apostle Peter – and I can't wait to get into the next verse from his Spirit-inspired pen.

But all of a sudden, whether you like him or not – you encounter one of the most confusing, difficult-to-understand texts in our exposition through First Peter.

In fact, around 500 years ago, when Martin Luther, the Reformer, put his thoughts on paper regarding this particular text, he wrote, “[There is no more] obscure passage perhaps than any other in the New Testament, so that I do not know for a certainty just what Peter means . . . I cannot understand and I cannot explain it and there has been no one who has explained it to me.¹

With that encouraging introduction this morning, take your copy of the New Testament and let's pick up our study - and let me just read you the paragraph at hand.

1 Peter 3:18-22. 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. Corresponding to that, 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, Who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him.

Obviously, some of this paragraph is easily understood without any explanation. But some of it is extremely difficult to understand even

after hunting down all the grammatical and historical and theological clues.

One author in my study calculated 180 different exegetical combinations, in theory, to the meaning of this text.ⁱⁱ

And it raises all kinds of questions, like: What was Jesus doing between His death and His resurrection?

- To what prison is He descending?
- Who are these spirits to whom He is preaching?
- What is He saying to them?
- How do baptismal waters correspond to the universal flood?
- And in what way does baptism save someone?
- And what happened before the ascension of Christ where He subjugated the spirit world of fallen angels?

One commentator, and Greek scholar whom I highly respect and whom early on I turned to to see what he had to say, begins his chapter on this text by writing, “This paragraph is notoriously obscure and difficult to interpret.”ⁱⁱⁱ Thanks a lot!

You may remember the Apostle Peter writing that rather humorous, but realistic statement in his second letter where he wrote that the Apostle Paul has letters *in which are some things hard to understand (2 Peter 3:16)*. Well Peter, you returned the favor!

As I read and reread and reread this text of scripture, it became apparent to me that if you look for a general theme without getting lost in the particulars, Peter is obviously taking us in this paragraph through the sweeping narrative of the passion and triumph of Jesus Christ.

He begins in *verse 18* with Christ dying. Then in *verse 19* he continues with Christ descending; then in *verse 21* with Christ rising; and then at the end of *verse 22*, it is Christ ascending.

Yes, some of the statements Peter drops into this narrative along the way are mind-blowing, but the overarching theme is the triumph of Christ who moves from death on earth to triumph in Heaven.

And this would be incredibly encouraging to the Christians who were – and are – suffering for following Christ especially when it doesn’t seem like the right side is winning.

So what I’m going to do is lead you through this text by following the general, obvious theme – that is, the unfolding gospel where Christ dies, descends, rises and ascends.

Let me put my first point this way:

1. Christ died, paving the way to Heaven.

Notice again *verse 18. For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God.*

This verse, by the way, has been characterized as one of the shortest and simplest, and yet one of the richest summaries given in the New Testament to the cross of Jesus.^{iv}

In fact, some historians believe these were the lyrics from an ancient creed or even an hymn text that was sung in the early church – this is such a powerful, concise summary – *Jesus, who never committed sin, died once for all*. In other words, in contrast to the annual sacrifices on the Day of Atonement that were repeated year after year, Jesus Christ’s sacrificial death was absolutely unique in His once-for-all-time atoning death. It was sufficient in, Peter writes, *bringing us to God*.

In classical Greek, this concept refers to the one making the introduction. In ancient courts, one author wrote, certain officials controlled access to the king. They verified someone’s right to see the king and then introduced that person to the monarch.^v

Peter uses that idea to describe Jesus as the Person who is verifying your right as members of the family of God by faith in His death and His payment for our sins.

In other words, anybody who wants to go to Heaven but doesn’t want Jesus to have anything to do with it has essentially ruled out, according

to Peter, the one whose role is to verify your right to get in!

Jesus is the customs agent. Jesus is the divine guard at that airport terminal, checking your passport; He wants to know if it has been stamped by His own blood. You are not getting in without Him.

So Christ died, paving your way to Heaven.

2. Secondly, Christ descended, proclaiming the victory of Heaven.

Notice the next phrase at the end of *verse 18*, ***having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.***

This is where you want to sit up straight in your desk. Peter is going to write some things on the board that are written in this manner nowhere else in the New Testament.

When Jesus died on the cross, you remember He said to God the ***Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit (Luke 23:46)***. And Luke adds, ***Having said this, He breathed His last.***

It was a real death because Jesus was a real human being. He was both God and man. He wasn't a phantom inhabiting a body; He was truly flesh and blood.

He could die because He was a human; He could die *and* pay the penalty for all your sins and mine, because He was God.

There on that cross, Jesus's body died, just like yours and mine will die one day. However, when Jesus died – just like you and me – He did not cease to exist, or go to sleep somewhere comfortable in Heaven.

No, we are about to find out He was very much awake.

Paul the Apostle tells us that when we die, our bodies die. In fact, our bodies look like they have fallen asleep (which is why death is often referred to as sleep); but your spirit goes immediately to be with the Lord in Heaven. Paul writes, ***to be absent from the body (in death) is to be present with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8).***

Let me add that we are given some sort of intermediate body – which isn't described for us, but shown to be proven – by the tour of Heaven given to the Apostle John where believers who had died were immediately singing before the throne of God (Revelation 7). They evidently have mouths and lungs and hands and feet and faces.

Jesus pulled back the curtain and showed us an unbeliever who died at the same time a believer died; and the unbeliever desperately wanted the believer, Lazarus, to dip his finger in some water and then come over to him and touch his tongue with the water, because he said, ***"I am in torment in this flame" (Luke 16:24)***

Evidently, the spirits of the dead, prior to the resurrection of their bodies from the grave, have temporary bodies with fingers and tongues and mouths – and bodies that can feel the torment of fire.

So we are given a temporary body, after death, prior to the resurrection where your original body will be reconstituted and brought from the grave, to meet your spirit and the Lord in the air (1 Thessalonians 4). And that temporary body will be forever replaced with a glorified immortalized body. And that's really another sermon – or 6 or 7.

But I say that to explain Peter's statement that the spirit of Christ is alive, following His death on the cross. In fact, Jesus is about to go somewhere and preach a sermon – *don't look ahead, just listen* – Jesus is evidently not sleeping somewhere, or in limbo, but very much alive.

Listen, Peter is about to tell us some of what Jesus was doing after He died on the cross and before He was resurrected from the grave three days later.

Think of it this way – Peter is going to tell us what Jesus did over the weekend. How cool is that?

Okay, now you can look – *verse 18*, the latter part – ***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 . . . okay, slow down.

Jesus is alive in the spirit and he is preaching to the spirits. Who are they?

Well, for starters, the word here for *spirits* is not used of human beings – except one time when it referred to the spirits of the righteous (**Hebrews 12:23**).

In every other instance, *spirits* (the Greek word is *pneumas*) always refers to angelic forces, both good and evil.

Jesus made a proclamation to the spirits in prison – so evidently these are demons or fallen angels.

Can I tell you that those 9 words in the English language have produced volumes of disagreement among Bible believing scholars?

Can I tell you that this paragraph has kept me awake at night? Can I tell you how many times my wife heard me say to her, “This is a terrible week . . . this is the toughest text I’ve ever encountered and nobody agrees with anybody!”?

I hope it encourages you as you study the word – to know that some passages simply defy understanding – because they either describe something we can’t understand or they don’t give enough details, which is what’s happening here.

- Who are these spirits exactly? We can make a good guess.
- What is this prison? We can make a reasonable answer.
- When exactly over the weekend did Jesus preach to them? We’re not told.
- Did they listen to Him or scoff at Him? We’re not told.
- What exactly did Jesus say to them in this proclamation? We’re not told, but I think I have a good idea.

Listen, there are at least 20 views out there on what’s happening here. And I’m going to give you the right one.

Actually, I say that tongue in cheek because I’m not absolutely confident – in fact, my view is sort of a combination of 2 or 3 other views.

The good news is this – you don’t have to get this right to go to Heaven. If it were that important, the Lord would have given us the answers to the questions I’ve raised about this visit of Christ, over the weekend, to an undisclosed prison somewhere to preach to incarcerated demons.

Now as you study the Bible, you discover important commentary from other passages of scripture. And there are a couple of verses in the New Testament that allude to this same issue.

In Peter’s second letter, he writes that ***God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into . . . pits of darkness, reserved for judgment (2 Peter 2:4)***.

So something happened to some demons who brought them into an early judgement prior to the final judgment where they also will be forever incarcerated in the Lake of Fire.

In Jude’s letter, he writes that ***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 (Jude verse 6)***.

In other words, demons have been kept in a special place of imprisonment in the spirit realm even to this day (and we don’t know the coordinates) and there they are imprisoned, unable to move about the country like the devil and all the other demons. They uniquely are held in prison, awaiting a future and final judgment.

Some would argue that this is the proof that demons are referred to in Genesis 6, cohabiting with human women, in their attempt to distort the human race and ruin the possibility of the Messiah being born as a sinless human being.

These are the demons who were judged and incarcerated in prison and their half-human, half-demon offspring died in the flood according to them.

That is actually an excellent view and many hold to it.

I'd be much more confident that this is the correct view if it weren't for Peter's own description here. He tells us that demons were disobedient not during the generations prior to Noah building the ark, but Peter specifically tells us that they were disobedient *during the construction of the ark*.

In fact, Peter uses a genitive absolute – *while the ark was being built*.^{vi}

Now it is possible that certain demons possessed men and women to lead in a rebellion against the message of Noah about God's coming judgment. And that is more like my view of this event.

But whatever these demons did, they did it during the 120 years it took Noah to build the ark. And here is what we *do* know: Jesus went and made a proclamation to them in prison.

Why? We are not told specifically, but keep in mind that demons are not omniscient. They don't know the future and they have to read the newspaper or hear it from some kind of demonic network of information if they want to know what happened somewhere in the world where they were not. And they've been in this pit of darkness ever since the flood.

They knew enough to know about the Messianic promise and they were in on Satan's passionate efforts to throw everything he could in the way of God's promises of a Messiah who would come; God promised Satan in *Genesis 3:15* – that human offspring would crush the serpent's head and the picture of the sacrifices with Adam and Eve and beyond were foretelling, foreshadowing this coming, Satan-crushing Messiah who would atone for the sinful, fallen human race.

These demons knew all of *that* – but they didn't know that it had finally happened. They didn't know the Messiah had finally come. They didn't know that the Lord had died and atoned for sin, once and for all, paving a way to Heaven for the believer.

They didn't know that their leader's (Satan's) plans were now crushed. They didn't know any of that. And I believe Jesus went down there and told them about it.

From the context here of Jesus's death on the cross, the payment for sin, the promise that Satan's plans would be crushed at the cross, the fact that every attempt to pollute the human race or to demonize the human race into defying God – I think it's safe to say that this was the proclamation – that all of their demonic efforts and satanic strategies were now, by the death of Christ and – He probably mentioned this too – His soon-coming physical resurrection – He was proclaiming to them that *they had lost* and Heaven had won!

And what about that ark? These demons had tried to stop it, upset it, defy it, whatever, but what happened with that ark?

Jesus probably told them about that too. Notice *verse 20, the middle part – during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water*.

In other words, through God's amazing plan in rescuing a remnant of believers – 8 people out of the entire human race – judgment fell, but everything Satan and the demons had tried to destroy didn't pan out the way they hoped because God's plan succeeded.

Now notice *verse 21. Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ*.

We've dealt with one difficult statement and now we have another one on our hands.

And I've met a lot of people who want to draw a circle around the words, *baptism now saves you* – and make the grave error that salvation is faith in Christ plus baptism.

The problem they are going to have, though, is with the rest of the verse.

The first sign of trouble for this view is the way the verse opens. *Corresponding to that*. What's *that*? – the floodwater and the ark.

In fact, the words *corresponding to that* come from the Greek word *antitupos* which gives us the word *antitype*.^{vii}

It can be translated, a figure pointing to; a counterpart; an earthly expression of a heavenly

reality; a symbol or an analogy of spiritual truth.^{viii}

In other words, Peter isn't saying that the act of baptism saves you, but that baptism is a picture of what saves you. It is an analogy of – an antitype pointing to – what saves you.

The waters of baptism do not save you. The act of being baptized doesn't save you anymore than Noah floating on that water in an ark saved him.

What saved Noah and his family, ultimately, was their trust and faith in the saving work of God.

The water represented judgment and death, but to them it lifted up that ark and kept them safe so that they didn't drown.

So, corresponding to that, when someone steps into the water of baptism, they are also surrounded by that which represents judgment. That water represents death and the grave. But you, the believer, are in the ark. That is, you are in Christ – there's the analogy – and baptism points ultimately to the resurrection of Christ. And because you have trusted by faith in Him, you also will not drown in the coming, final judgment of God.

You might even notice how the verse is constructed – notice the parenthetical comment – *Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you* – notice the dash – go down and begin reading after the next dash – *through the resurrection of Jesus Christ*.

That's the point – *Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you . . . through the resurrection of Jesus Christ*.

Baptism is a powerful statement of your faith in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In fact, it is the defining statement of the believer.

When Noah got into that ark, it was the defining moment of his faith.

Baptism is your outward *pledge* – Peter writes here – *a pledge* – a declaration on your part that your conscience is clean by the saving blood of Christ and you are trusting in God's plan alone. It's an incredibly wonderful and significant statement of your faith.

So Christian, if you haven't been baptized, what are you waiting for? The act of baptism doesn't save you; it points to the One who saved you. And you get the chance to make the public statement that you have trusted in the Ark – the Lord Jesus.

So make your statement, take your stand, identify with the one who saved you by making this analogy, this antitype, a personal statement as you are baptized publically as a follower of Christ.

**Christ died, paving the way to Heaven.
Christ descended, proclaiming the victory of Heaven.**

Now thirdly;

3. Christ rose and ascended, proving the supremacy of Heaven

Later part of *verse 21. Through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him.*

Forty days after His resurrection, our Lord ascended to heaven to sit at the right hand of God the Father. To be at *the right hand of God* is an expression that refers to the place of power and adoration and authority.^{ix}

Peter is simply wrapping up this text by emphasizing the complete victory and sovereignty of Christ over everything – all of creation – over the entire race of humanity; over all the spirit world of all the holy angels and all the demons with their puny, delegated authority. They are indeed fatally wounded and ultimately subjected to the power and plan of Christ.

Let me make sure we get what Peter wanted his readers to get. I don't think he wanted them to get hung up on demons and spirit prisons and convoluted baptismal conclusions.

He was writing to people who were suffering for Christ. That's how Peter began this paragraph; they were suffering!

So keep these two truths in mind:

- **First, it isn't what it seems: the winning side often seems to be losing.**

Just remember Christ on the cross. And remember Noah. No one listened. Everyone mocked him. The winning side doesn't always appear to be winning.

They ridiculed Noah's belief in that ark and they ridicule your belief in Christ.

You might be surrounded, but you are safe in the ark of Christ, forever. And that leads me to the second truth to keep in mind;

- **Secondly, it isn't over; the suffering believer has, in Christ, a spectacular future.**

A spectacular future? How can we be so sure? Because Christ died and descended and resurrected and ascended.

I close with this: the Battle of Waterloo is one of the most famous battles in history.

It occurred on the mainland of Belgium and staged the attempted comeback of Napoleon against the forces of western allies, including Germany and Great Britain.

When Napoleon was finally defeated in this historic battle, Europe entered a time of unusual peace and prosperity.

One author carried the interesting story of how the news about Waterloo reached England.

News was carried first by a ship that sailed from Europe across the English Channel to England's southern coast. The news was then relayed from the coast – all the way to London – by a series of signal flags.

When the report was received at Winchester Cathedral, in London, the flags atop the cathedral began to spell out the defeat of Napoleon by Wellington. The message began by signaling the words, "Wellington defeated . . ."

However, before the message could be completed, a fog moved in – as quickly as it can move in on the San Francisco Bay.

As a result, the rest of the message was hidden by the fog. Based on what was, in fact, an incomplete message, the citizens of London thought Napoleon had won, which would have meant a devastating defeat for England. Gloom filled the nation as the bad news quickly spread everywhere.

But then the mist suddenly lifted and the flags high on Winchester Cathedral could be seen – completing the news "Wellington defeated Napoleon."

As the completed message spread throughout country, gloom turned into joy and people began dancing in the streets.^x

There's a mist around planet earth – a fog that can settle in, and at times, during suffering or pain or difficulty or loss, even to the believer, obscure the message.

Maybe you're having trouble seeing it today because of what you're going through.

Peter reminds them, and us, just remember the entire message because it isn't what it seems and it isn't over.

We have only just begun to understand and to trust and to identify with Him and to rejoice – and oh, we will one day rejoice – as we worship the One:

- who died and paved the way to Heaven;
- who descended and proclaimed the victory of Heaven;
- who rose and ascended and proved the supremacy of Heaven.

He wins! He wins. In fact, He has already won.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 11/05/2017 by Stephen Davey.

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- i David R. Helm, 1-2 Peter and Jude, (Crossway, 2008), p. 119
- ii Ibid
- iii D. Edmond Hiebert, 1 Peter (AMG Books, 1984), p. 234
- iv Hiebert, p. 235
- v John MacArthur, 1 Peter (Moody Publishers, 2004), p. 207
- vi Hiebert, p. 245
- vii Fritz Rienecker & Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 760
- viii MacArthur, p. 217
- ix Warren W. Wiersbe, Be Hopeful: First Peter (David C Cook, 1982), p. 106
- x Adapted from Helm, p. 122