

## First Peter No. 19 “Swimming Elephants”

1 Peter 3:18-22

March 11, 2018

The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn

- v. 18 The ESV is right not to capitalize Spirit. The NIV editors capitalized “Spirit” because they took it to be a reference to the Holy Spirit. But the contrast with flesh suggests a contrast between two modes of existence – the earthly and the heavenly, the physical and the spiritual (not in the sense of body vs. soul but in the sense of temporal and eternal, mortal and immortal). The importance of this is that it suggests that whatever Christ preached and to whomever he preached he did so *after* his resurrection, not before it. [Clowney, 158-159]

Peter himself, in his second letter will admit that there are some things in Paul’s letters difficult to understand. Well, here we have before us this evening a text as difficult to interpret as any in the Bible. Difficulties of interpretation are of two kinds. It can be, as I suspect Peter found it so sometimes in Paul, that the subject itself is deep and hard to understand. Think, for example, of Paul’s discussion of sovereign grace in Romans 9 or his juxtaposition of Christ’s conquest of sin and our continuing struggle with it in Romans 6 and 7. But it can also be, as it is here, difficult to tell exactly what the words mean, what the biblical author, Peter in this case, meant to say. We can discuss what the teaching means only if we know what the teaching is! What does Peter mean for us to understand in vv. 19-20? Through the ages these verses have baffled commentators and produced a bewildering array of interpretations. As you may know, this is the text that produced the doctrine, enshrined in later versions of the *Apostles’ Creed*, that Christ descended into hell between his crucifixion and his resurrection. Martin Luther wrote of these verses:

“This is a strange text and certainly a more obscure passage than any other passage in the New Testament. I still do not know for sure what the apostle meant.” [Cited in Jobes, 236]

But, if that is the case, and if this is the Word of God, then as Bernard of Clairvaux put it, “what is difficult to understand ought to be for Christians delightful to inquire into.” And as Augustine wrote long before, “Just as there are shallows where a lamb may wade, so there are depths in the Scripture where an elephant may swim.” [Cited in Packer, *Quest for Godliness*, 99] Thinking of that remark by Augustine, I used “Swimming Elephants” for a sermon title some 20 years ago, and after he saw it in the Sunday Bulletin, Mike Simpson produced for my inspection an article from a 1991 *National Geographic* with a picture of an Indian elephant actually swimming in the ocean with his trunk sticking well up well out of the water. But, that is a different kind of elephant and a different kind of swimming that we’re interested this evening.

As I said, there is a wide variety of interpretations of vv. 19-20. John Calvin held, for example, that the “spirits in prison” were the faithful dead of the OT who were awaiting the completion of their redemption by Jesus Christ. After his resurrection the Lord came

to proclaim his triumph to them. He gave the word “prison” a very benign sense, a place like a watchtower where they stayed watching for Christ’s work to be completed.

Others have held that the “spirits” are the souls of the wicked who died at the time of Noah’s flood and that the preaching to them in the prison of hell was either by Christ himself between his death and resurrection or Christ through Noah at the time of the flood – an announcement of their doom on account of unbelief on the one hand or perhaps simply the preaching of the good news of salvation to them which they did not believe and for which they perished.

Others have held that the “spirits” are the fallen angels who are thought to have been referred to in Genesis 6. There we read that the sons of God – a term that certainly can refer to angels – married the daughters of men and by those marriages the human race lost almost entirely its faith in God and so was destroyed in the flood. Christ then preached his triumph and their condemnation to these demons in the prison of hell where they had been consigned after their sin.

And so on. In other words, there are difficulties identifying who the “spirits” are – are they men or are they fallen angels? – and if they are men, which men? Similarly, there are difficulties identifying the “prison” – what sort of prison is it? And there are difficulties identifying the “preaching.” Is it the proclamation of doom or salvation? Still more, where and when did this preaching take place – at the time of the flood, after the death and before the resurrection of Christ, or at some other time – and who was the preacher: Noah, Christ, or Christ through Noah at the time of the flood? In other words: “Where did Christ go? When did he go? To whom did he speak? What did he say?” Let me give you a brief sampling of some of the problems facing interpreters of these verses.

1. “Spirits” as used here, without any qualification as, for example, we find in Hebrews 12:23 (where we read of the “spirits of just men made perfect”) always refers to non-human spiritual beings, angels or demons. This word lends support to interpretations that identify the spirits with the demons, especially the fallen angels who were apparently the “sons of God” mentioned in Genesis 6 who married the daughters of men and corrupted the human race, which led to the judgment of the flood.
2. The word “preach” almost always in the NT refers to the proclamation of the gospel. In only a few instances does it retain its general sense of “proclaim” or “announce” some message. The use of this word lends support to interpretations that have Christ or Noah preaching the gospel, the good news of salvation, which, in turn, lends support to those interpretations of vv. 19-20 that take “spirits” to refer to men, since we don’t otherwise know of any gospel preaching to fallen angels.
3. The reference to the days of Noah is a grand complication for all interpretations that take “spirits” to refer to human beings, because it then has to be explained why Christ should preach only to those particular men, from that one single moment in human history.

And so on. No wonder that through the years different people should take such different views of the texts. Roman Catholics have found support here for their doctrine of the *limbus patrum* – a region bordering on heaven where the righteous dead of the OT – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Jeremiah, and all the other believers – awaited the completion of their atonement when Jesus died and rose again. They couldn't get into heaven upon their death because the atonement had not been completed. And once the price of that redemption had been fully paid, Christ went to that *limbus patrum* – the limbo or border of the fathers – proclaimed his victory and their deliverance to the people waiting for him and led them out of there to heaven. Lutherans have found here support for their doctrine that Christ, between his death and resurrection, went down to hell, there to proclaim his triumph and the justness of their doom to the evil spirits who had so bedeviled his three-year public ministry. I should say as an aside that the grammar of vv. 18-19 is decidedly against the notion that the preaching that was done was done between Christ's death and his resurrection. After his death he was made alive in the spirit and it was in that state, his resurrection state, that he did this preaching.

Liberal Protestants, on the other hand, have found in these verses support for their doctrine of a second chance, post-mortem conversion: that the gospel will be preached again to men after they die and they will have another opportunity to believe in Christ and be saved. And we still have not considered what point this has for the argument that Peter is in the middle of making in these verses. He is encouraging his readership to be willing to suffer for Christ's sake, even to suffer injustice on behalf of their Savior. How do vv. 19-20 fit into *that* argument? Well, I could thoroughly confuse us all by trying to sort out all of the possibilities. One scholar calculates that there are some 180 possible interpretations taking all the details into account. [cf. Jobes, 239] So, let me tell you what I have come to think Peter meant and the Holy Spirit means by the statement that Christ went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built.

Let me say, at the outset, that years ago I definitely preferred an interpretation of these verses that identified "spirits" with men and not with demons and the "preaching" that was done to have been done in the days of Noah and not by Christ in person subsequent to his resurrection. I resisted the interpretation of Genesis 6 that took the sons of God who married the daughters of men to be a reference to evil spirits. The notion of fallen angels marrying human women seemed unlikely if not absurd to me. I had always preferred the interpretation that takes the "sons of God" to refer to the holy line, the believing descendants of Seth mentioned by name in Genesis 5, who then committed the sin of intermarrying with unbelieving wives and so, spiritually speaking, polluted the human race and brought on the judgment of the flood. Taken this way, this text and that history would be a principal illustration of an emphatic biblical teaching that Christians must marry only in the Lord. God desires a holy seed as Malachi puts it and intermarrying with an unbeliever is no way to produce a holy seed. The flood generation would thus be one of the Bible's principal illustrations of that fact. Bad things happen when Christians marry unbelievers. That would make real sense of this passage in 1 Peter 3 and would certainly make it easy to preach!

I didn't want these verses to be about demons marrying human women or about Christ proclaiming his conquest and their judgment. But, at the last, that is what I think these verses are about. And it will become clearer to you that they are if you turn over a page or two to 2 Peter 2:4-5 and compare what Peter has written there with what he has written here in his first letter.

“For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell, and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment; if he did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven others, when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly...”

Now it is true that we might seem to find here some support for the opinion that the preaching being done and described in 1 Peter 3:19 was preaching done by Noah – or, at least, Christ through Noah – that is, preaching done in Noah's own day. After all, Noah is here in 2 Peter 2 called a “herald or preacher of righteousness,” and that seems a parallel to the preaching or proclamation Peter mentions in 1 Peter 3:19. The verb “preach” is found in 1 Peter 3 and the noun “preacher” in 2 Peter 2. But, be that as it may, the text from 2 Peter 2 seems now to me virtually to demonstrate that the “spirits” to whom Christ preached in prison must be the angels who sinned and, in particular, the angels who sinned in the events described in Genesis 6, when the sons of God married the daughters of men and by so doing, which of course was their intention, corrupted the human race and brought it almost entirely into the thrall of unbelief. Not only do we have in 2 Peter 2 the mention of fallen angels specifically, fallen angels mentioned in close connection with the history of Noah, but as well angels that were consigned to a prison. Surely these are the “spirits in prison” Peter mentions in our text tonight. You have the same thought, by the way, in verse 6 of Jude, angels who “left their proper sphere now kept in eternal chains and gloomy darkness.” Obviously, Peter and Jude shared an interest in this history. As you may remember 2 Peter and Jude share a considerable amount of material.

Without going into further detail, I will simply say that, it now seems to me that this interpretation of 1 Peter 3:18-22 is subject to the least difficulties and solves the most problems. It is most in harmony with the thought of 2 Peter 2, and, perhaps more importantly, with the final verse of this section in 1 Peter 3:22 where we read that Christ has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand -- with angels, authorities, and powers, in submission to him. Why would that particular point be made except that the entire issue of evil spirits, Christ's triumph over them, and the proclamation of that triumph was raised just a few verses before? The NT, to be sure, never anywhere else mentions a specific encounter between the exalted Christ and the demons in prison. But it is entirely consistent with the NT emphasis on Christ's victory over the evil spirits, a point made many times, as you know.

Every interpretation of these two verses is beset with problems but the problems with this interpretation are, in my judgment, less punishing than the problems that beset the alternatives. Remember Peter, and presumably his readers, knew what he was talking about, even if we do not.

Well, then, if that is how we ought to read these verses, what is Peter saying to his readers, and so then to us? What is his point? If he means that subsequent to his resurrection, Jesus Christ proclaimed his triumph over the forces of evil to that assembly of fallen angels who had sinned in the days before the flood, how does that prove an encouragement to his readers in the face of their suffering for their loyalty to Christ in their own time and in their own place? The “For” with which v. 18 begins certainly means that what Peter is saying supports his assertion in v. 17: that it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God’s will.

The answer seems to be this. These Christians to whom Peter was writing were a small, persecuted minority beset on all sides by a majority that was contemptuous, if not outwardly hostile, to their faith in Jesus Christ. In all likelihood, Peter was also suggesting, as Jesus himself explicitly taught, that in their hostility those enemies of the Christians were doing the work of their father the Devil. However unbeknownst to them, they were, as Paul put it in Ephesians 2, following in “the ways of the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.” But Christ’s triumphant proclamation to those fallen spirits reminds these persecuted Christians to whom Peter was writing that small and put upon as they may have been, they will be delivered just as Noah was. The demons are no match for the Lord Christ!

I realize that all of this discussion of the right interpretation of these verses may seem to some of you quite dull and uninteresting and irrelevant. But there are many ways in which we demonstrate our reverence for the Word of God and one of them is the care we take to understand it properly. Another is to study with an open heart the meaning of what we read in the Holy Scripture for ourselves. I want to conclude by elaborating at least some of the meaning that lies in these two verses we have studied, understanding them in this way.

We are all, in our inbred and sinful tendency to view the world almost entirely in terms of ourselves and our own lives and our own happiness, I say we are all often guilty of forgetting the larger picture. Our perspective is too limited. We live looking at the world as it were through a telescopic lens, in which all that can be seen is ourselves and a little bit of the area immediately surrounding us; the things that touch our lives and impinge upon our happiness immediately. If by the grace of God and the Spirit of God we replace that telescopic lens with a wide-angle lens and see ourselves in the larger picture, we discover that our lives are part of a much greater reality. We are living in the midst of mighty developments or catastrophic events everywhere, all the time.

This piece here about demons in Noah’s day and Christ’s proclamation of his victory over them can sound to us like some ancient mythology. Angels mating with the humans and the like. Most people are, whatever they may say if you asked them directly about their belief structure and their worldview, are functionally naturalists and materialists. The only things that seem genuinely real to them are the physical world that they inhabit every day, its laws, its principles, its events, its possibilities, and its happiness or sadness for themselves. Angels and fallen angels have no place in their scheme of things, no place

at all in their understanding of what their life means, what their existence means day by day. C. S. Lewis wrote in the preface to *The Screwtape Letters*:

“There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors, and hail a materialist and a magician with the same delight.”

Well, we Christians in the western world are far too much materialists! But for us, spiritual beings – especially fallen and evil spiritual beings – conquered by Christ as they have been, serve a most important purpose. In fact, this may be the primary purpose of the revelation of their existence that is given to us in Holy Scripture. After all, the Bible says very little about what they do or how they do it. It never tells us how to identify their influence in the world or in our lives. But their existence reminds us of the cosmic struggle that is being waged in our world, of the powers of darkness ranged against us, and of the mighty conquest of those powers by our great Captain, the Lord Jesus Christ. Something mighty is afoot in this world. The life that we have been given is a life against which are arrayed supernatural forces that are terribly more potent and powerful than we are ourselves. We have adversaries far stronger than we are. Were it not for the power of Christ and the intervention of Christ we would be completely subject to those forces, would do their will and serve their interests never for a moment aware of what we were doing. But Christ delivered us from their power. *He who is in us is greater than he who is in the world.*

Think of the Christian life as you think about war. Many of you have seen the Steven Spielberg film, *Saving Private Ryan*. Of course, I would rather watch *Pride and Prejudice* but Florence always wants to watch *Saving Private Ryan* for the umpteenth time. The movie has been praised for its graphic and unsentimental portrayal of war; its honest depiction of the terror and the brutality of war and how war tests a person, how it finds what a man can stand, what he can bear and what he cannot. How many men there have been who have been simply undone by combat; and how many men have risen to the challenge and faced down their fears!

Some of you have seen the movie *Unbroken*. It's a lie; the movie is a terrible lie! Angelina Jolie chose to lie to her audience. The hero of the movie, Louis Zamperini, didn't come home from the Second World War unbroken; he came home shattered by his experience. He soon became an alcoholic, he was angry, he had nightmares every night about his wartime experiences in a Japanese prison camp, and he was about to lose his marriage. But then, persuaded by his wife, he went to a Billy Graham crusade in Los Angeles in the late 1940s and was converted. After hearing Graham the first time, he was intrigued enough to go back a second time. After the second night at the Graham crusade, he went to a park, sat down and read the Gospel of John; read right through the Gospel of John. He committed his life to Christ and that night, for the first time he had no nightmare, no reliving of his wartime horror. Christ put that broken man back together again like Humpty Dumpty. War had destroyed the man. There were a lot of men who

came home from that war broken and were never put together again by the grace of God. But Louis Zamperini was.

But, you see, war does not really change anything fundamentally. It doesn't change the number of people who die. We all die. It probably doesn't change the percentage of people who die a painful death. Many in war die instantly and many others who die of wounds at least do not suffer the agony of months and years of modern medicine's effort to prolong life. *What war does is to illuminate life*, to concentrate its character and nature in a way that we can see it as we don't ordinarily see it otherwise. War makes visible to us the inevitability of death, the fear of death, the foolishness and selfishness of man, and so on. We can maintain pretenses about life, about our own lives, about what kind of people we are, about what we are living for, about what is important and good and bad and heroic and happy in some large part because we are able, outside the experience of war, to remain oblivious to what is actually going on all around us all the time. *Which is why, brothers and sisters, multitudes of human beings, including numbers of people you know, live perfectly ordinary human lives and wake up in hell.*

Do you remember Wilfrid Owen's famous poem from the First World War?

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,  
 Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,  
 Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs  
 And towards our distant rest began to trudge.  
 Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots  
 But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;  
 Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots  
 Of gas shells dropping softly behind.

Gas! Gas! Quick boys! – an ecstasy of fumbling,  
 Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,  
 But someone still was yelling out and stumbling  
 And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime...  
 Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,  
 As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,  
 He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

In if some smothering dreams, you too could pace  
 Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
 And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,  
 His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;  
 If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
 Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,  
 Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud  
 Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, --

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest  
 The old lie: *Dulce et decorum est*  
*Pro patria mori.* [It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country.]

Do you see? This is the way that war illuminates life. You can think one thing about life and death, good and evil, war, sacrifice, and heroism when you are sitting in an arm chair by the fire. These things appear very differently to you when you are trudging barefoot through the mud, helping men blinded by a shell burst or by gas, when day after day of gruesome battle seems to accomplish little to nothing, when the only time you are not terrified is when you are asleep, and only sometimes then. In the old war movies, you never saw a leg being blown off, a head disappearing from a body, or a man losing control of his bowels. The real thing is very different from the glorified, sanctified, sanitized, sentimentalized version that makes war seem glorious precisely by hiding from us what actually happens in war. *And it is in precisely this way that the demonic realm and Christ's conquest of it on our behalf illuminate our lives.* We go on, you and I, far too easily, far too often, thinking sentimental, vacuous thoughts about our lives because we forget what they are really about and what is really going on in us and all around us all the time and what the terrible issue of all of that is.

The Bible has great sympathy for sorrowing and suffering Christians; for Christians suffering in a world full of trouble and woe. Jesus Christ himself was man of sorrows and he has great sympathy for his suffering disciples. But there is another message in the Bible that, in some respects, is even more encouraging and more consoling and more nerving and more strengthening than that. And it is this. "You are suffering? You are facing some sort of opposition? You're finding your life as a Christian difficult in some particular way? Of course, you are. There is a great battle to the death underway in this universe and you are in the thick of it yourself." Everyone is on one side or the other. The Devil spills the blood of his troops with no thought whatever of their welfare; but even the Lord Christ, in this battle, must put his much-loved soldiers through harrowing ordeals, long wearying marches, fierce combat with powerful enemies. There is death all around you; the wounded and dying lie scattered on the field around you. If you could just see it like Gehazi saw the angels of God at Dothan, you could see the bleeding and the blinding and the dying all around you. There are terribly powerful armies colliding against one another always and everywhere in this world. You are living your life on a battlefield that has become a virtual moonscape for all the destruction that has been visited upon that single place through the years.

No one in the thick of battle, with bullets whizzing above him as he grinds his head and face into the ground seeking shelter, with artillery shells churning up huge mounds of earth all around, with the grim sights and the screams of the wounded filling up his eyes and ears, I say, no soldier is surprised that in such a place, at such a time, his life should be difficult, even terribly difficult and terrifying. He does not stick his head up above the top of his foxhole or the bomb crater and whine, "Gee, why are they shooting at *me*? Was it something I said?" He knows better; he is being shot at by one side because he is on the other! He understands that his place on the battlefield explains his predicament.

Peter is as much as saying the same thing to these Christians and to you and me. But he adds this: you have this immeasurable advantage. You have the luxury of knowing that you are on the winning side; that you are going to see the end of this war and victory in this war with your own eyes. You're going to survive this and you're going to march in the great victory parade wearing the laurels that the Lord Christ, your commander, will bestow on all those who have faithfully fought his battles. The victory has already been announced, the defeat of his enemies already proclaimed to them by the King of Kings.

I don't know where the battle rages right now for each one of you. I know about some of you, but by no means all. I don't know how life is difficult or where your courage and faithfulness are being most sternly tested at this particular moment. But I know that all of you are in the midst of a great war, are soldiers in that great war – I hope that all of you are on the right side in that war! – and I know you live amidst the violence of war. And it's only to be expected that you will have difficult days before all the fighting is done. I certainly hope that you will have difficult days! For the only one who passes through a great war without difficulty is the one who runs from the fight.

And, let this also be said. If one is speaking merely of some nation of this earth, then it is as Wilfred Owen said, simply an old lie that it is sweet and fitting to die for one's country. But when one's King is the Son of God and one's country is the kingdom of God and the victory is absolutely certain; and when the enemies are as purely evil and malevolent and cruel as are the demons of hell, "*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*" – "It is sweet and it is fitting to die for one's country" – even if one must die every day for many years before the battle is brought to its end.