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# SPIRITS IN PRISON

IS THERE A GOSPEL FOR THE DEAD?

By THE LATE C. F. HOGG

An Exegesis of 1 Peter 3: 8—4: 6\*

In order to an understanding of the Scriptures respect must be had to the context, for when an attempt is made to explain their words without reference to the setting in which they are found, confusion results.

It is the aim of the present paper to ascertain just what Peter did say, and then to seek to understand his words and their reference solely in the light of other and related Scriptures, scrupulously avoiding the importation of anything from without.

## A Related Old Testament Scripture

Before we consider the passage in which the words stand, let us look at Psalm 24. It falls into three parts. Verses 1 and 2 declare the Lordship of God the Creator. Verse 3 asks the question, who shall be found worthy to stand in the presence of the Lord, the Creator and Preserver of the whole earth? The answer follows in verse 4, 'He that hath clean hands and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, and hath not sworn deceitfully.' Where may such a man be found? Is there one in the whole world bold enough to claim to be such an embodiment of this verse as to be able to come unto the presence of God without a mediator? There is not one. And yet there has been One, the Lord Jesus Christ, whose heart was pure, whose hands were clean, who never lifted up His soul unto vanity, or uttered one deceitful word. He alone has earned the right to enter into the presence of God. What was the end of His life? He died, not

\* Mr C. F. Hogg was well-known to readers of *B.S.* in past years for he wrote for our pages on many occasions. He was joint author with the late Mr W. E. Vine of the well-known volumes on *Galatians* and *Thessalonians*. This article is reproduced from our Vol. V. because of the timeliness of the subject: propagandists of the doctrine of 'a second chance' after this life are more active than ever, and their arguments are most subtly woven to capture the unthinking Christian.

for His own sins, but for ours. He was raised from among the dead by the power of God. After forty days He was taken up from the midst of His disciples, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. He passed through all the heavens and into heaven itself, and there sat down on the right hand of the majesty on high, angels, authorities and powers being made subject to Him.

The closing part of Psalm 24 describes His reception. The cry is raised by one band of angels, 'Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in.' Another band responds with the question, 'Who is the King of glory?' The first reply, 'The LORD strong and mighty, the LORD mighty in battle.' Thus is the Conqueror welcomed on His return from the defeat of His enemies.

### The Setting of the Text

We may proceed now to consider 1 Peter 3:8-22. The apostle writes to a persecuted people to show them how they should behave themselves so that by well-doing they might put ignorant persecutors to shame. If they are to be persecuted, let it be for righteousness' sake, not because they deserve to be punished for wrong-doing. Verse 8 instructs the Christians how they are to behave themselves in their relationship with one another. Verses 9-12 instruct them as to their relationship with those who are not Christians.

The apostle says, in effect, If you pursue such a manner of life as this who will do you any harm? But, and if you must suffer, do not be afraid, sanctify Christ in your hearts as Lord, let Him be your fear. The man who fears Christ will not fear anyone else. Maintain a good conscience so that when people speak against you, they may be put to shame who revile your good manner of life in Christ. 'For it is better if the will of God should so will, that ye should suffer for well-doing than for evil-doing.' For, as the apostle has already shown in chapter two, verses 21-24, it is out of character for a Christian to suffer for wrong-doing, for the simple reason that Christ suffered for our sins, therefore when a Christian suffers for wrong-doing he is suffering out of character with his calling altogether.

In verse 18 the apostle speaks of Christ as having suffered for sins once, notwithstanding that He was the Righteous One. The believer has taken the name of Christ upon him, he must not,

therefore, think it strange if he, too, is called to endure fiery trial, since he is therein partaking in the sufferings of Christ (4:12, 13).

#### What Happened to the Lord Jesus at the Cross?

He was 'put to death in the flesh'. There is no article in the original; literally the words run, 'put to death in flesh,' which can only mean that in His body He experienced what men know as death. He could not have died had He not 'come in (the) flesh' (1 John 4:2). Death became to Him a possible experience only in virtue of His incarnation; hence the first statement. He 'was put to death in the flesh'.

And he was quickened. The word 'quickened' (*zōopoieō*) is the opposite of the word, 'put to death,' it means to make alive.\* He was made alive in spirit. There is no article and no capital letter in the original, or rather, the oldest manuscripts are written in capitals throughout. Plainly this cannot refer to the Holy Spirit for the reason, that the phrase is literally 'in spirit,' and it stands over against 'in flesh,' 'He was put to death in flesh and quickened in spirit.' If we read 'Quickened by the Spirit' as the Authorized Version has it, we must also, to be consistent, read 'He was put to death by the flesh,' but that will not yield good sense at all.

#### Paul's Words to Timothy

What, then, are we to understand by the word 'spirit'? We may find the solution of the difficulty in 1 Timothy 3:16, 'He

\* An analysis of the New Testament use of *zōopoieō* will be found on pages 154, 155 of *Notes on Galatians*, by W. E. Vine and the writer. There, as stated above, it means to make alive. In the LXX, however, it also means to preserve alive, as in Judges 21: 14; Nehemiah 9: 6, etc. There is no example of this meaning in the New Testament, unless that is its meaning here. There are, however, cogent reasons for refusing to render the passage, 'put to death in flesh, but preserved alive in spirit'. This statement would be equally true of men generally (cf. 'be not afraid of them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul' Matt. 10: 28), and therefore it would be superfluous to make such an assertion regarding Christ. Moreover the resurrection was the vindication of the Lord, His resurrection body the evidence of His triumph over death. In the interval between death and resurrection that evidence was still lacking. It is unnecessary, therefore, to understand *zōopoieō* in the passage under consideration in any other sense than that it has in each of the other places of its occurrence in the New Testament. 'It is certain that the New Testament strictly and exclusively employs *zōopoieō*, for making alive' (W. Kelly).

who was manifested in (the) flesh, justified in (the) spirit.' The phrases are closely parallel. If Paul tells us that the Son of God was manifested in flesh, Peter tells us that in flesh He was put to death. That is to say, since He was to be the revealer of God to men, He must live among them, must partake of 'blood and flesh' with them (Heb. 2:14). The effect of the revelation upon men was to arouse their deepest hatred. They nailed Him to a cross with two malefactors, 'on either side one, and Jesus in the midst,' thus unconsciously fulfilling the prophecy, 'He was numbered with the transgressors' (Isa. 53:12).

God reversed their verdict, for as we read in Hebrew 7:26, He who in life was 'holy, guileless, undefiled,' in resurrection was 'separated from sinners'. Men condemned Him to death; God justified, that is, vindicated, Him by raising Him from the dead. In the body in which He died, in that body He was raised from among the dead. It was the same body, and yet it was vested with powers not hitherto used. He was not yet manifested in the 'body of His glory,' but in His resurrection body, according with Paul's description of the resurrection body of the believer, which is to be after the fashion of his Lord's, 'it is raised a spiritual body' (1 Cor. 15:44). It is to this body Paul seems to refer when he writes, 'justified in spirit'.

Once more the parallel is complete. If Paul tells us that the Lord was 'justified in spirit,' and if we are right in concluding that the reference is to His resurrection, so also Peter tells us that He was 'quickened in spirit,' and we conclude that he also refers to His resurrection. And with this correspond the words of Paul, 'The last Adam became a life-giving (*zōopoieō*) spirit' (1 Cor. 15:45).

#### A Post-Resurrection Journey

Peter proceeds, 'in which ("in which resurrection body") he went'—the word means to undertake a journey. This journey was undertaken at a time defined by the context, after His resurrection, and as the word indicates, it had a beginning, a course, and an end. Moreover, it was He, Himself, who undertook this journey. There is no hint that He went by deputy of any kind. The words seem plainly to imply a personal journey here as they certainly do in verse 22, 'having gone into heaven'.

The purpose of the journey is next mentioned—that He might preach to imprisoned spirits. It may be more convenient to

enquire first who these spirits were, and then to enquire what was preached to them.

The word spirit (in Greek *pneuma*\*) covers a wide range of meaning in the New Testament. Plainly it has not the same meaning here that it bears in the preceding verse. It is too readily assumed that the reference is to the human spirit, but wherever this is intended the fact is plainly stated, as in Hebrews 12:23, 'the spirits of just men,' and in verse 9 of the same chapter, 'the Father of (our,—margin) spirits,' and in Luke 8:55, 'her spirit returned,' and in Galatians 6:9, 'The grace of the Lord Jesus be with your spirit, brethren'. Not in any passage is it used of the spirits of human beings, whether incarnate or discarnate, without some unmistakable identification in the context. There is no such intimation in 1 Peter 3:19.

The demons of the Gospels are also called spirits, as in Matthew 8:16, 'He cast out the spirits with a word,' and Luke 10:20, 'The spirits are subject unto you.' These spirits, however, cannot be identified with the spirits in prison, for they were free at least to seek an entry into human hearts, and to move from place to place, as in Luke 11:26, 'The unclean spirit . . . taketh seven other spirits more evil than himself; and they enter in and dwell there.'

It is possible that some of the phenomena of modern spiritism are due to the activities of spirits of this order. But the spirits of whom Peter speaks were imprisoned, and moreover, were spirits when they were disobedient. There is no suggestion in the context that they had ever been anything but spirits. The words are explicit enough, 'spirits in prison which were aforetime disobedient'; the sentence must not be understood as though it read 'spirits of them which were aforetime disobedient,' for the simple reason that not only is that not what Peter wrote, but is quite different from what he wrote.

The time of their disobedience is also defined. The order of the words in the sentence in Greek is 'disobedient aforetime when awaited the longsuffering of God'. This seems to make it clear that 'when' refers not to the time of the preaching but to the time of the disobedience. And that was 'in the days of Noah'.

\* A complete analysis of the New Testament occurrences of spirit (*pneuma*) will be found in *Notes on the Thessalonians*, by W. E. Vine and the writer of this paper, pages 204, 205.

### Identifying the 'Spirits'

Refusing then the apparently unwarranted assumption that incarnate human spirits are in view, we look elsewhere for a clue to their identification. In 2 Peter 2:4, 5 the apostle again refers to Noah and the period of the Flood, and in this connection says that 'God spared not angels when they sinned, but cast them down to hell\* and committed them to pits of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment.' And Jude, apparently with the same incident in mind, speaks of 'angels which kept not their own principality, but left their proper habitation, He (God) hath kept in everlasting bonds under darkness unto the judgment of the great day' (v. 6). It is difficult to resist the conclusion that these passages also refer to the 'spirits in prison,' nor is it necessary to do so, for the identification furthers the elucidation of all three.

These spirits then were angelic beings who, because of the enormity of this new disobedience, were deprived even of that liberty which God had permitted to them when they were involved with Satan in his fall. The time of this wickedness is mentioned twice by Peter as being 'the days of Noah'.

In the introduction to the story of the Flood in Genesis, chapter 6, it is recorded that certain 'sons of God' broke down the barriers that God had erected between spirits and men, and this with the willing co-operation of the latter, for it is also stated in this connection that 'all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth'. To this otherwise universal corruption Noah and his family alone were exceptions. As to his personal character Noah was 'righteous', as to his family it was untainted, he 'was perfect in his generations' (vv. 9-12). Hence Noah and his family alone were preserved when God swept the earth clean of a corrupted race.

'Sons of God' are mentioned about half a dozen times in the Old Testament (Job 1:6; Ps. 29:1, etc.) and in each case elsewhere with unmistakable reference to the angelic hosts. Only for good and cogent reasons can this meaning be set aside in this passage; and such reasons are not forthcoming.\*\*

\* *Tartarus*, which the Greeks conceived to be a place of darkness and extreme cold. Contrast the *Gehenna* of the Jews, a place of darkness and fire. That angels are spirits compare Hebrews 1: 18, 14.

\*\* If the line of Seth were in view it would be difficult to conceive of a world in which the descendants of Cain lived among, or in the neighbourhood of the descendants of Seth for 1,500 years without (Cont. on p. 60)

Identifying these 'spirits in prison' with the 'angels which . . . left their proper habitation,'\* with the 'angels (that) sinned,' and with the 'sons of God' that brought disaster upon the world, and added punishment upon themselves, we may proceed to enquire what the character of the preaching was to which Peter refers. It is plainly inconceivable that they had the gospel preached to them, for its terms make plain, as in John 3:16, that the gospel is applicable only to mankind.

#### Purpose of the Journey

The word translated 'preach' in the passage under consideration is frequently used for the preaching of the gospel, indeed, but in such cases the context always makes the fact clear. The word itself is colourless and is used without reference either to the subject of the preaching or to its source. It is used of the law, for example, as in Acts 15:21; Romans 2:21. The Lord reminded His hearers that Nineveh 'repented at the preaching of Jonah,' but Jonah's message was of judgment, not of grace, 'yet forty days and Nineveh shall be destroyed'. The English phrase 'preach the gospel' is represented by one word in Greek, and this Peter uses a little later (4:6), to which we shall have occasion to refer presently. But although the specific word was ready to hand, the apostle chose this colourless term to describe the purpose of the journey to the 'spirits in prison'.

What then was the subject-matter of the preaching? Consider once more the connection. Christians, the apostle says in effect, must needs suffer in this life, even as did their Lord. He suffered even to death; so may they have to do. But let them be encouraged

intermarrying. And when at last intercourse between the two races, descended from the same parent stock, became general, why should the offspring of these unions be persons of extraordinary stature and valour, and so extraordinarily corrupt and violent that God had recourse to such a drastic purge at the Flood? This theory, moreover, involves the impossible conceptions that only the women of Cain's posterity were 'daughters of man,' that godliness ran in the line of Seth for a millennium and a half, that, in fact, this moiety of the race escaped the consequences of the Fall for that considerable period. And yet 'death passed unto all men, for that all sinned.'

\* The word occurs elsewhere only in 2 Corinthians 5:2 where it refers to the resurrection body of the believer, 'our habitation which is from heaven.'



by this, that God raised Him from among the dead so that in the very body in which He suffered now become 'a spiritual body' (1 Cor. 15:44) and itself the very evidence and proof of His victory, He proclaimed that victory even to the spirits that, because of aggravated guilt, are incarcerated in lowest hell.

The closing section of Psalm 24 seems to be the complement of the passage now under consideration. After carrying His message of victory to these rebel hosts, in the same resurrection body, He ascended into heaven, where He was received amid the acclamations of the holy angels. The tidings of His victory that yesterday rang back from the floor of hell, are today re-echoed from the roof of heaven. He is 'seen of angels' (1 Tim. 3:16) for there is no order of created intelligences that is not in some way affected by the victory of the Cross. As Peter goes on to say, 'who is on the right hand of God, having gone into heaven; angels and authorities and powers being made subject unto Him'.

#### **Preaching to the Dead?**

The words of 1 Peter 4:6 demand a brief notice. Verse 5 speaks of the responsibility of men to the Judge of all, and goes on, 'For unto this end was the gospel preached even to the dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the Spirit.'

That the subject of this preaching was 'the gospel of God concerning His Son,' 'the gospel of our salvation' is not to be disputed. Do the words mean that it was preached to the dead since they died? Or, to some now dead while they were yet alive? Either meaning is possible; the context will enable us to decide. Let us consider the former alternative first. The purpose of the preaching is defined, 'that they might be judged according to men in the flesh'. But the dead have passed beyond the ken of men; how then could men judge them whether for their acceptance or refusal of the gospel, heard only after they had left the scene in which alone their conduct can come under human observation?

If, however, we understand the apostle to mean that the gospel was preached to persons who have since died no such difficulty arises. The effect of their acceptance of the gospel was to arouse the animosity of men, and to subject them to persecution under which they lost their lives. When a man becomes a Christian turning to walk in the right ways of the Lord like Noah (Heb.

11:7), he 'condemns the world' and the world in turn condemns him.

The ways of the Lord condemned the world, and in retaliation the world put Him to death. So had it been with those of whom the apostle speaks. Their manner of life was an implicit condemnation of the ways in which the ungodly delighted, and in retaliation the ungodly had put them to death. But God justified His Son by raising Him from among the dead. And these also shall live according to (the will of) God, and in the day in which the Lord returns in glory they will return with Him. And as the Lord was justified, or vindicated, in His resurrection body, so also will they be justified, or vindicated 'in spirit', i.e., in their resurrection bodies, bodies conformed to the likeness of their Lord's. If they had never heard the gospel, or, having heard it, had not incurred the enmity of men by becoming Christians, they might have lived on and flourished like the persons described in Psalm 37:35,

'I have seen the wicked in great power,  
And spreading himself like a green tree in its native soil.'

But so to escape the condemnation of men is to incur the condemnation of God. Let the Christian, therefore, 'be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do'; let him trust 'in God which raiseth the dead' (Luke 12:5; 1 Cor. 1:9). Supposing it granted for the moment, though Scripture does not warrant such a concession, that those who have never had the gospel preached to them in this world will hear it after death, and in another world find their first opportunity of submitting themselves to the will of God in Christ, how would that concern those who have heard it in this life? Certainly it affords no ground for the assumption that those who had heard it and refused or neglected it, shall ever hear it again.