

• *Difficult verses*

1 Peter 3:19–22 are famous for their difficulty, and famous for the strange ideas that have been read into them!

• *We must remember the flow of the argument*

We must remember the flow of the argument. Christians are to be peaceable. Ultimately they will not suffer<sup>□1</sup>. Suffering for righteousness' sake brings God's blessing<sup>□2</sup>. Meanwhile we must be ready to explain ourselves to unconverted people<sup>□3</sup>. We must be conscientiousness<sup>□4</sup>, making sure we suffer persecution only for good reasons<sup>□5</sup>. Jesus' atonement also involved unjust suffering<sup>□6</sup>, says Peter. Indeed Jesus is the classic example of God's purpose going forward through unjust suffering. His death was a substitution. It leads to our death to sin. It leads ultimately to victory.

□1 3:13  
 □2 3:14  
 □3 3:15  
 □4 3:16  
 □5 3:17  
 □6 3:18

• *Suffering for righteousness brings blessing and advances God's purposes*

• *Jesus' sufferings led to triumph not failure*

It is this last matter which is the main point of 1 Peter 3:19–20. The unjust suffering of Jesus did not lead to failure; it led to the greatest triumph imaginable. Jesus' death led to His victory. Peter's friends need to remember this. After Jesus rose from the dead He went to proclaim His triumph to the most notorious group of evil spirits ever known in the history of the world<sup>□1</sup>.

□1 3:19-20

• *After Jesus rose from the dead He proclaimed his triumph to a group of evil spirits*

*'In the Spirit also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison<sup>□1</sup>. These were the ones who were disobedient at the time when the patience of God was waiting during the days when Noah was building the ark, in which a few, that is eight people, were rescued through water<sup>□2</sup>.*

□1 3:19

□2 3:20

• *Six points of interpretation*

Some points of interpretation need to be mentioned. (i) I take it that it is certain that 'made alive in the Spirit'<sup>□1</sup> refers to the resurrection. So 3:19 does not (in my opinion) refer to the time between Jesus' death and resurrection. Nor does it refer to the pre-existent Christ in the days of Noah. (ii) The first two Greek words of verse 19 ('in which') refer to the Holy Spirit ('In the Spirit') or to the whole idea just mentioned ('In the state of being made alive in the Spirit'); the difference is not great. Either way the event mentioned here was achieved by the Lord Jesus Christ. (iii) The 'spirits' are the evil spirits involved in the sin at the time of the flood. They are not human beings.<sup>a</sup> (iv) 'Made a proclamation' does not refer to preaching the gospel; it refers to a more general 'proclamation'. Colossians 2:15 gives a hint of the nature of the proclamation. Peter does not here use the word 'preach good news', which he uses elsewhere<sup>□2</sup>. (v) 'Prison' refers to the temporary holding place in which spirits are held until a time of punishment<sup>□3</sup>. (vi) Although the location of the prison is not mentioned, it is more likely that the 'going' is part of Jesus' ascension (note the 'going' into heaven in 3:22 where the same word is used). If the question is asked, the 'going' is going up, not going down! There was a triumphant victory over evil spirits in the cross; the ascension was Jesus triumphant 'going' to a place of supreme kingship<sup>□4</sup>.

□1 3:18

□2 1:12,25;  
 4:6  
 □3 compare  
 Revelation 20;  
 2 Peter 2:4;  
 Jude 6

□4 see 3:22

**1. Christians need to be aware they are in a spiritual battle**

**1. Christians need to be aware they are in a spiritual battle.** Peter and his friends are living in extremely difficult days. There is much evil around. Many pagans are 'disobedient' to God<sup>□1</sup>. Behind the threatening situation is the activity of Satan (as 1 Peter 5:8 will say). The situation was similar in Noah's days. While Noah was building the ark, he and his family were a tiny minority facing an ungody environment.

□1 2:4, 8

**2. The slowness of God to judge wickedness**

**2. The continuance of the persecutors is another example of the slowness of God to judge wickedness.** God was patient in the days of the flood. The wickedness of those days had wicked spirits behind them; so it is in Peter's day also. But they need not worry, Jesus will triumph again, because He has triumphed already. The continuance of opposition is not God's failure; it is God's patience.

**3. Their unjust suffering will lead them into ultimate triumph**

**3. Their unjust suffering will lead them into ultimate triumph.** Just as Jesus triumphed over the evil powers behind this world, so will the Christians. Peter and his friends might well suffer, but they should know that suffering is a highway that leads to triumph, even over the forces of wickedness.

• Noah's sufferings – judgement did eventually fall on his persecutors

The sufferings of these friends of Peter must not make them lose heart. The greatest persecution of all history was perhaps that experienced by Noah, when eight people were faced by the ridicule of the entire Mesopotamian world! The judgement was slow in coming but eventually the wicked generation of Noah's day were swept away. Peter's friends are likewise in a hostile environment. Jesus was crucified and anything might happen to His disciples. (We recall that Peter himself would – as the earliest Christian history book tells us – be crucified in Rome, 'crucified head downwards, for this is how he requested to suffer'.<sup>b</sup>)

• Noah and his tiny 'congregation' were kept safe

Yet despite the terrible opposition that Noah must have faced, he was brought through to safety. When the judgement fell, Noah and his tiny 'congregation' were kept safe: 'a few . . . were saved, rescued, brought to safety, through water'. The Christians of Roman Asia Minor can be sure something similar will happen to them. Jesus has triumphed over the evil spirits; He is at the right hand of the Father. No matter what happens, Peter and his friends will be triumphant.

• Likewise for Peter's readers

**Footnotes**

**a** There is no example of the word 'spirit' (without a following 'of...') referring to a human being. When a human being is referred to there is a following 'of...' (as in Hebrews 12:23, the only example in the New Testament). 'Spirits' in the New Testament mainly refers to evil spirits. The story that Peter refers to was famous among first century Jews. The Ethiopic book of Enoch (1 Enoch 10–16; 21 especially) is one of several Jewish documents which give us the background to 1 Peter 3:19–20; see 1 Enoch in J.H. Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (Doubleday, 1983), which contains also 2 Baruch 56:12; Testament of Naphtali 3:5 and 2 Enoch 7:1–3.  
**b** See Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2:25:5–8; 3:1:2.

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