



# International Bible Lessons Commentary

Uniform Sunday School Lessons Series

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## **Noah and the Spirits in Prison**

**Genesis 6 & 1 Peter 3:17-22**

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Some sincere Christians may have ideas on these verses different from mine, but others might enjoy thinking about these possible ideas. The Bible does not tell us all we might like to know about what these verses might mean, especially the “hard verses,” and I might be wrong. So, let us be like the Bereans: “Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for *they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true*” (Acts 17:11). If what I have shared below is not true, please let me know.

Some of my ideas presented here are the result of prayerful speculation, but these speculations may also be true. It is important to try to separate Biblical facts from our speculations about Biblical facts, and to try to make these separations clear to others — I always try to do that. Regarding my interpretations of the less obviously understood verses below (at least less obviously understood by me), I have never heard or read my ideas expressed by others. I am willing to be corrected, because I do want to be true to the Bible, the inerrant written Word

of God. Depending on your class's ability to deal with new ideas and uncertainties, you may or may not want to discuss different views on these verses in your class. While making this study, I have had to revise some of my previous ideas. If you study these verses, please share your ideas and/or your class's thoughts on these ideas after your study on the [International Bible Lesson Forum](#) or to me directly and personally at [lgp@TheIBLF.com](mailto:lgp@TheIBLF.com).

**(1 Peter 3:17) For it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.**

In 1 Peter 3:14, Peter proclaimed that even if Christians must suffer for doing good, they are blessed: "But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened" (1 Peter 3:14). If God sees that suffering will benefit or bless someone; then, God will bring about the perfect amount of suffering they need for them to be blessed. When Christians suffer, God's ultimate purpose is to conform them to the image of His Son (see Romans 8:29). Peter insisted that it is far better to suffer for doing good, so God can make us better people in the image of His Son, than to suffer God's discipline for doing evil.

Before, during, and after the great flood, Noah and his family suffered many hardships, but they were saved and blessed. Those God removed from the earth in the great flood suffered God's discipline for doing evil.

**(1 Peter 3:18) For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit.**

Jesus Christ always was, is, and always will be righteous. Jesus Christ never sinned, or did anything wrong or unrighteous, but He suffered. He suffered for us. From this verse, we learn the purpose of His suffering was to bring people to God. As the righteous Son of God, Jesus Christ had to suffer for the unrighteous to bring us to God.

Death means separation. Just as everyone since Adam and Eve (with the exceptions of Enoch and Elijah) died physically, so Christ was put to death physically “in the body.” At death, His physical body was separated from His spiritual self. Christ suffered death, and every person will suffer death until Jesus Christ comes again. At death, our physical bodies will separate from that which is spiritual within us. Our physical bodies will return to dust and our spiritual selves will go to a new location.

Bible teachers differ on the meaning of “made alive in the Spirit.” As far as I know, the Bible does not explicitly tell us what that phrase means. In my opinion, when speaking of Jesus being “made alive in the Spirit,” this most easily means that upon the moment of Jesus Christ’s death on the cross, the moment His body died, that Jesus began a new relationship with His Father through the Holy Spirit (far beyond my understanding how), which was prior to

His bodily resurrection from the dead and His receiving a glorified human body on Resurrection Sunday.

Christ's body did not see decay or return to dust (Acts 2:31). His body was raised from the dead and reunited with His spiritual self into a glorified human body.

Remembering that only the Bible is infallible, we can read different viewpoints on the "hard verses." We can learn from sharing different ideas on difficult to understand passages of Scripture, and you may want to do more research on these "hard verses."

### **(1 Peter 3:19) After being made alive, he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits—**

This verse is less easily understood than the others. It is one of the "hard verses." Many believe this verse means that Peter was referring to Christ preaching through Noah in the days of Noah. I do not think this is accurate.

I believe there is another more obvious possibility — in His pre-resurrection "made alive in the Spirit" condition, prior to Jesus' bodily resurrection on Resurrection Sunday morning, Jesus went and proclaimed the good news of His death and resurrection and its meaning to those who were alive in their spirit selves who died in the great flood and who were imprisoned and waiting to hear Jesus' proclamation, waiting to hear the gospel, the good news. From Peter's words, it just seems obvious to me that Peter intended to teach that after Christ's death and before His

bodily resurrection He preached to these imprisoned spirits.

Bible teachers do have different ideas (speculations) about what these verses mean, so I will primarily share only my thoughts (speculations) and conclusions on what the verses mean below. You may want to do additional study and come to your own prayerful conclusions.

It just does not seem reasonable to me to try to read back into these verses that they refer to Jesus preaching through Noah in the days of Noah. The Bible does not clearly tell us so. The Bible does not tell us the name or the location of this spiritual prison. The Bible does not tell us that this spiritual location was hell or “purgatory” (which is not named in the Bible) or some other clearly defined location. The Bible does not tell us how many (out of the millions who died in the flood) were sent to this prison, or if all who died went to this prison, or why these were imprisoned instead of being sent to a different location (if there was more than one location for those who died — to hell, for example). The Bible teachers I have read have concluded (and I formerly agreed with this idea) that this prison was hell, and all who died on the earth in the great flood were sent to hell, but the Bible does not say that specifically and much is left to speculation — speculations may or may not be true. That is not to say that those who died in the great flood had a second chance to be saved after death (see more on that idea below).

**(1 Peter 3:20) to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water,**

Some sincere Bible teachers believe that Jesus went to hell after His death and before His resurrection (to them, the prison Peter wrote of was hell, or to be imprisoned after death is going to hell), and that Jesus' proclamation in some way reinforced the fact to the prisoners that all those imprisoned in hell were condemned forever because they were disobedient and had died in a state of sin, wickedness, and unbelief.

The Apostles Creed states that Jesus descended into hell before He rose on the third day, but it does not say what Jesus did there.

Many use Hebrews 9:27-28 and Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus (see Luke 16:19-31) to prove their belief that the prison was hell. In Hebrews 9:27-28, we read, "Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him." Some have argued that all who died in the great flood were judged and then condemned to hell; therefore, Jesus could not have preached the good news to them to save them.

Clearly, the Bible does not give wicked unbelievers who have died any hope that God's judgment on them will ever be favorable or might ever be favorable in their future after death. Nothing in the Bible should ever be used to encourage anyone to think that after they die they can or will repent and trust in Jesus and be saved (or be given the opportunity to repent and come to faith). The Bible does not teach "second chances" after death. To avoid judgment after death, before they die people need to believe the facts in Hebrews 9:27-28: "*Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.*" Do we believe this? The Bible says it is a fact. Could it also be true (even though a speculation) that those who were in the spiritual prison (not in hell) that Peter writes of could have been waiting for Jesus, their Redeemer? A speculation that might be true.

Consider further. Remember what Peter wrote in 1 Peter 3:20, "**God waited patiently** in the days of Noah while the ark was being built." Was God only patient "while the ark was being built" and not afterwards? I believe God waited patiently for the wicked to repent, not that God waited patiently for Noah to finish building his ark, so He could destroy human lives as soon as possible. Let's look at this idea further. How long might God have been patient? Was God patient "Only until the first drops of water fell" or "Until the earth was completely covered with water"? The Bible does not clearly give us an answer to these questions.

My ideas on these “hard verses” come from the fact that I am a firm believer in authentic “death bed conversions.” A “death bed conversion” might be similar to the death of the repentant thief who died on the cross beside Jesus. Jesus told him that he would be with Him in paradise (Luke 23:43). There *may have been* some “death bed conversions” during the great flood. The Bible does not tell us whether there were any or not during the great flood. The possibility is worth thinking about, though remembering it is speculation, that there could have been some “death bed conversions” during the flood. If there were any conversions during the great flood, we still need to remember: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:8-10).

Consider the questions below and some *possible answers* I that have considered. Perhaps you have heard some questions like these. I believe my answers to these questions are consistent with the teachings of the Bible as a whole. But even though I have prayerfully studied the Bible, I may certainly be wrong, and I am certainly open to correction and learning ideas from others. I believe my ideas are consistent with the Bible and with the character of our loving, just, gracious, and merciful God as revealed in the Bible. I think these ideas will help us give some



possible answers to many questions of both believers and unbelievers, especially to those who would doubt the integrity of God. I have also tried to point out where I am speculating, to separate Bible facts from my speculations.

*1. In the days of Noah, how did God feel about the wickedness and the violence on the earth?*

Bible fact. In Genesis 6:6, the KJV says — “It grieved him at his heart.” The ESV and NRSV say — “it grieved him to his heart.” The NASB says — “He was grieved in His heart.” I think God’s heart was surely more than “deeply troubled” — NIV.

*2. Why was God grieved?*

God was grieved because God loved all the people He created in His image. He grieved because He saw how much they were suffering because no matter how much they were suffering, no matter how many times they had heard the truth over the years (Noah was a preacher of righteousness), no matter how many times they had been warned, they were not repenting, and they were not returning to faith in Him for salvation. God waited patiently for those He loved to repent until He took the only loving, just, merciful and wise action left to Him when He sent the great flood; otherwise, God would have done something different. I think these are clear facts taken from our understanding of the whole Bible.

*3. Why did God decide to remove these He loved from the earth?*

God removed them from the earth to exercise His just and loving discipline, to serve as a warning to others (individuals, cities, and nations — to people and cities like Sodom and Gomorrah), and to stop the spread of wickedness and violence that would only get worse and make those He loved more miserable and evil for generations to come — making everything worse for future generations of people that He loved on the earth. I do not see speculation here, but God probably had more reasons than these.

*4. Ultimately, how did God demonstrate His great love for sinners, for wicked, evil, violent people?*

In John 3:16, we read, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” God demonstrated His great love for sinners by sending Jesus to die sacrificially for them (for us). This seems clear from the Bible.

We do not know the answer to this question: “Can John 3:16 be applied to any who may have repented and may have turned to God during the great flood before they died (if any did so)?” In my opinion, the Bible does not clearly answer this question. However, the Bible clearly says that Jesus went and made proclamation to the spiritual

prisoners who died in the great flood. In my opinion, Jesus may have gone to their prison to tell them why they were there and not in hell, that He had died for them too because of their faith, just as He had died for all the Old Testament saints before and after them, and that He had saved them by grace through the repentance and faith that they expressed to God during the great flood (during their death bed conversion). Could Jesus have gone these spiritual prisoners “to preach deliverance to the captives” (Luke 4:18—KJV)? Or, “to proclaim freedom for the prisoners” (Luke 4:18—NIV)? Even those prisoners who had died during the great flood? I think this is a realistic possibility for a loving God and Savior to do, though some interpret Luke 4:18 differently from me.

*5. Why did God decide to remove these people from the earth by water?*

God created people and God could have removed them from the earth in a variety of ways. God could have used large hailstones or fire and brimstone or the swords of His avenging angels to destroy everyone. Why did God use water instead of quickly executing everyone? For example, God quickly and decisively executed the sinners in Sodom and Gomorrah. The Bible does not tell us the answer to this question. Could God have only wanted to connect the flood in some way with baptism? I think He wanted to do more than that. Again, we do not know the answer. The Bible does not tell us. But there is at least one possible answer to the question: it would take longer for these

sinners to die as the waters rose and covered them than by sending fire from heaven or just giving everyone a massive heart attack. This question and possible answer raises another question.

*6. Did God want all those who died in the flood to have a long painful fearful suffering death?*

Does someone who truly loves another want them to die a frightening long painful suffering death? No. Does the Bible reveal God as less compassionate than the people He created? No. In Romans 5:8, we read, “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Christ died on the cross because He and God the Father love sinners and they wanted to save sinners from the eternal consequences of having sinned. The Bible clearly teaches “God judgeth the righteous, and God is angry with the wicked every day” (Psalms 7:11 — KJV). Or, “God is a righteous judge, a God who displays his wrath every day” (Psalms 7:11 — NIV). Still, there is a more compassionate reason for God removing these sinful people from the earth by water than desiring to see them suffer painfully as long as possible before they died.

*7. Did God want all these people who died in the flood to perish or go to hell?*

Remember 1 Peter 3:20, “**God waited patiently** in the days of Noah while the ark was being built.” In 2 Peter 3:9,

the Bible says God does not desire that any should perish: “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead **he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish**, but everyone to come to repentance.” It is my belief that God is longsuffering and patient, and that God may have wanted those who died in the flood to repent and trust in Him for salvation before they died. But the Bible does not specifically tell us so. Why was God so slow in sending the flood and so slow in having Noah spend years preaching and building the ark before the flood and so slow in having the waters rise (though too quickly for many)? Perhaps God was showing that He did not want anyone to perish, but He did want everyone to come to repentance. During the great flood, was God making death bed conversions possible? Is that possible? I think so.

*8. Why did God use water instead of any other method?*

God used water to demonstrate His great love for those He was going to remove from the earth. He loved them so much that God was patient and He wanted to give them time to repent and come to true faith in Him. Those who repented and came to faith during the great flood were probably the ones God sent to a spiritual prison.

*9. So, if God loves people so much, why do some people perish?*

The Bible clearly says, “They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved” (2 Thessalonians 2:10). Those living in the days of Noah prior to the great flood certainly refused to love the truth before the waters rose. Did some come to see and love the truth as the waters rose and before they died? We are not told so in the Bible, but that possibility would give a reason why Jesus made proclamation to the spirits in prison who died during the flood.

*10. How were people who lived in Old Testament times saved?*

Those, such as Enoch, Job, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Elijah were saved because they loved the truth, and they had faith that God who had promised to send the Redeemer would keep His promises and send the Redeemer. They believed that the Redeemer would crush Satan’s head (see Genesis 3:15). They trusted as Job did: “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God” (Job 19:25-26). Up to the level of their understanding and according to the amount of revelation God had given them, they believed in the Redeemer who was to come; so, they did not perish but received eternal life. In short, they were saved by God’s grace through faith. They lived by faith in God and trusted God to send the Redeemer. And when Jesus came, God kept His promise.

Considering the above questions and answers.

I think God used the great flood waters in order to give people who had previously only thought evil thoughts and did only evil deeds continually to think about God once again and to think about their sinful situation after many years of sinful living.

Since God loved those who died in the great flood and since God is patient and does not desire that any should perish, perhaps God planned for some to repent of their sins and come to faith in Him as their only hope of salvation as the water rose around them.

God loved them, and deathbed conversions are possible. In my opinion or speculation — which may or may not be true — I think that by grace God could have saved those who had repented and turned to Him for salvation as they began to approach certain death; then, because God is loving, just, and merciful, in order to discipline them and prepare them to meet Jesus, God sent to prison those who had repented and had come to faith in God until Jesus would come and proclaim the good news of salvation to them — a message they had hoped to hear someday.

**(1 Peter 3:21) and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ,**

In short, without going into all the different views of baptism, baptism should help every believer in Jesus Christ have a clear conscience toward God. We are saved by the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. When we come to faith in Jesus Christ, He is “the ark” who saves us from perishing.

**(1 Peter 3:22) who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.**

Christ glorified in His resurrected human body has ascended into heaven. He sits in power at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. All angels, authorities and powers are in submission to Him, and we await His return from heaven.

Many people have given different answers to these “hard verses.” Since I have not read all the possible answers that have been given, I do not know if my ideas have been shared or not or if better answers have been given, but I am willing to keep learning and I do believe the possible meanings of these verses are worth thinking about as possible options present themselves.

May God bless our continued study of the Word of God! And may we help others come to saving faith and gain a stronger faith in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ as we try to give honest answers to honest questions.



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