

THE SPIRITS IN PRISON

A SERMON

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“By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison.” 1 Peter 3:19

THIS I believe, is reckoned by most divines and good people one of the most ambiguous scriptures in all the New Testament, and ambiguous I suppose it will remain down to the end of time; for I have not taken these words as a text with the least hope of throwing any more light upon their original or historical meaning than that which most people now have. The words seem to refer, taking them historically, to the time of Noah, the antediluvian period of the world. We have only a few conjectures to guide us upon this part, and I shall dwell scarcely any time in the region of conjecture, and come into the region of self-evident fact. It appears, then, that it refers to the preaching of Noah; that Christ, who is God as well as man did by his Spirit preach to men by the instrumentality of Noah, for Noah was a preacher of righteousness. And it is said of these spirits that they were “sometime disobedient while the ark was preparing.” Now the question arises whether that preaching brought those spirits out of prison, and brought them to the knowledge of the Lord, so that they were saved, and left the world before the flood came. It would look at first sight as though this were the case, because it says, “which were sometime disobedient,” which would seem to imply that they were at last brought into the obedience of faith, and were perhaps taken home to glory before the flood came. Then, on the other hand, taking another view, it does not seem so encouraging, because they are said to have been “disobedient while the ark was preparing,” and therefore, if they remained disobedient, or in unbelief, while the ark was preparing, then of course these same men were swept away with others. There was a twofold end that Noah had in preaching: the one was to bring out those that belonged to the Lord savingly, and the other was to make that repentance of reformation in the world that should keep the flood off, that should render it unnecessary that the Lord should bring the flood; like the repentance of the Ninevites, which warded off the destruction at that time of Nineveh. And therefore, the Lord said in relation to this aspect and object of the preaching, “My Spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he is also flesh; yet his days shall be an hundred and twenty years;” referring perhaps (conjecture again) to the time in which the ark was building. This might have been the object, this reformation, and then of course the flood would not have come. But the state of the world at that time was evidently one that answered in some measure to the keynote that was set at the very beginning by Cain. Cain slew his brother Abel, and the posterity of Cain, as the elder in the family, would regard themselves as the rightful heirs of the world, and so we read that the earth was filled with violence. So, I expect that the violence consisted chiefly in persecuting and slaying the people of God. And

then up sprang a race of mere professors, that married ungodly women. "They saw the daughters of men were fair," were smitten with them, the fools! as Huntington says, the beauty of the skin lies at the mercy of a cold or a fever. Nevertheless, they were smitten and married the daughters of men. Well, now don't you be too rigid with your religion, and I won't be too rigid with mine. So, they wrapped it up, the devil got possession of the world, until it got into such a state that hardly any person dared to say a word for God's truth. Therefore, the Lord said, As my Spirit has striven with you, and my servants preached, but you are still in the spirit of Cain, a spirit of murderous enmity against my people, and as the bulk of professors are gone over to carnal and ungodly women, the only remedy is to sweep the whole of you away with a flood. But when the Lord speaks of regeneration, he never speaks of the Holy Spirit striving. Mere reformation is one thing, as by the preaching of Jonah; but when the Holy Spirit sets in for salvation, then he does as you have recorded in the 37th of Ezekiel; there are the dry bones, the Holy Spirit sets in by virtue of the new covenant, these bones come together, stand upon their feet an exceeding great army, are brought into the bond of God's everlasting covenant, and enjoy that everlasting inheritance which the Lord has provided for them. This text, then, is very ambiguous taking it in its historical sense. Whether it means that some were brought to a saving knowledge of the truth, and taken home to glory before the flood came, or whether it means that the world was preached to for its reformation in order that the judgment might not come, which of these two things the text means is perhaps very difficult to decide. Therefore, I do not pretend to explain what other people cannot explain. There are secret things that belong to God, and there are many questions the Lord has left unanswered. He has given us some very dark and ambiguous hints, or, as it says, "dark sayings," and I suppose they will never be clearly and fully opened up until we appear in a brighter and better world. I therefore, especially with my humble gifts and limited acquaintance with these things, shall deal with the words of the text only in that way in which their meaning is self-evident. Time is precious, and the preaching of the gospel is such a solemn matter, that I must neither trifle with the time nor with our subject; and therefore, we must not occupy time in speculation, but dwell upon the actual self-evident meaning of the text.

There are three things that we may notice. First, *the state of the spirits of men*, they are in prison. Secondly, *how they are to be brought out of that prison*. Thirdly, *what is to be done with them when they are brought out*.

First, *the state of the spirits of men*. We have here a self-evident fact, that the spirits of men, that is, their immortal spirits, their immortal souls, are in a prison. And while this text is ambiguous in the respects I have stated, if I am not mistaken, before we get to the end of our discourse we shall recognize the text as a very instructive one, and especially on this ground: if you can ascertain the kind of prison that the spirit is in, you will at once recognize the adaptability of the means by which the spirit is to be brought out of the prison; and when you recognize that adaptability, it will at once throw into your mind a conviction of the futility, and I was going to say the absurdity and foolery of all the ceremonies of men in this great matter of bringing the souls of men out of prison. Let us, then, look at the prison. Now you cannot imprison a spirit within a material prison, a material pit, or anything that is tangible; therefore, we must discard all idea of a literal prison, and must take the language entirely in a figurative sense. Let us see, then, what that prison is in which the spirit is. First, it is the prison of a spiritual death; that is to say, it is dead to everything spiritual, and the spiritual blessings which are in Jesus Christ. The soul, while in this prison of death, does not sigh after, nor seek after, nor feel any concern about these things. Perhaps even there may be

some here this morning who have never felt any abiding concern whether they are to be saved or lost. What is this? Their souls are in the prison of spiritual death. How solemn are the words of the apostle! "The natural man receives not the things of the spirit, neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." If you present the spiritual blessings of the new covenant, such an one does not feel his need of them, and does not understand them; he is altogether blind to them. I flatter myself I am favored to be tolerably clear in my statements of the mysteries of the kingdom; yet persons have sat here for months, and some for years, and have gone away, one to one gross system, another to another, another has thrown off religion altogether, just showing that they never understood what they were. The Savior might well say, "Take heed *how* you hear," as well as in another place, "Take heed *what* you hear." The spirit of the natural man is not only in death, but in darkness. The 3rd chapter of 2nd Corinthians is very instructive upon this. The apostle there says that the law is the ministration of death; that is to say, that all the law of God can do is to condemn us in all we are. It does so testimonially: "There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none that does good, no, not one." Do you see this? If so, then there is life in the soul: you begin to see your poverty, you begin to see the sentence that stands against you; you begin to see that the law is spiritual, but that you are carnal, sold under sin. Now as the spirit of the natural man is in darkness as regards the terrible majesty of God's law, it is content to remain without the gospel. Hence, "if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them" that are too far gone for the gospel to do anything with them; to them that are too guilty, too filthy, too far involved in their sin and guilt for the gospel to do anything with them. Not a word of the kind. I cannot but stop here, and thank God and bless his holy name that there is no case too bad for the gospel, there is no case too stubborn for the efficacy of Immanuel's blood; there is no prison in which the soul is shut up that is too strong for the mighty arm of the dear Redeemer. "If our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost." The Lord never did, and never will withhold the gospel from any one on the ground of the badness of the man; for he never yet manifested his mercy to any one on the ground of the goodness of the man, and he will not withhold it on the ground of the badness of the man. The apostle Paul is a good witness of this, and so are you too that are taught of God. He well knew it was not on the ground of any goodness in him that the Lord appeared to him, and gave him that light that was above the brightness of the sun; and as the Lord could not appear to Saul on the ground of any goodness in Saul, so the Lord did not abstain from showing him mercy on the ground of any badness. How true then are the words, "God commends his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us"!

Now we are also spoken of as being in unbelief. "God has shut them all up in unbelief." And there is something very natural for a man to disbelieve what he does not know his need of, and what he does not see the use of. For instance, take the everlasting covenant; the natural man is never troubled about that; he does not know his need of it. Take the perfection of Christ's work; the natural man does not trouble himself about that, he does not know his need of it, nor see the infinite use of it. And as to regeneration, being born again, the natural man does not trouble himself about that. It is all to him an entirely hidden mystery. If he should give a natural assent to the truths of the gospel, yet, not knowing his need of those truths, and not really understanding them in their infinite value to his salvation, he will easily give them up again. "But that on the good ground is he that hears the word and understands it," and cannot give it up again. You see, friends, the spirit is in prison to spiritual, not literal, not physical elements. When the apostle said he had a law in him that brought him into bondage, he did not mean that his body brought him into bondage. A great deal is said against the poor body; the apostle says all sin is without the body; sin is of a

spiritual kind, spiritual death, spiritual darkness, and spiritual unbelief. And then another element is enmity. "The carnal mind is enmity against God." The world in hating God's truth do not know what they hate. Why, when Cain slew Abel, he knew not what Abel's religion was; all Cain knew was that he hated it, but what it was he hated he did not know. And when they put the prophets to death, they did not know what their religion was; all they knew was, it was something they hated. And when they crucified the Savior, they did not know what he was, they did not know what his doctrines were, they did not know what his spirit was, what his mission was, what his salvation was; all they knew was, it was something they most heartily hated, and that in their judgment he ought not to live; and the Savior, in compassion and mercy, recognized that ignorance when he cried in that solemn hour, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." What does the apostle Paul say? Now, Paul, how came you to do what you did? Well, "I did it in ignorance and unbelief; and I truly thought I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus." I must just stop here to throw in one hint, not that you need it, but to remind you that our text is an instructive text. Do you not see here that the people of old, by depending upon the elders, depending upon the opinion of what in modern phrase would be called the Pope and priests, do you not see that they were led, by that dependence upon the elders, to do what they otherwise would not have done? So, it is written, Matthew 27:20. But the chief priests and elders persuaded the multitude that they should ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus. "For the common people heard him gladly." But then we must go to the elders. Oh, said the elders, he is a blasphemer: he has a devil, and is mad; he is a winebibber, and a gluttonous man; do not hear him anymore. And the priests got a law passed that if any man did confess him, he was to be put out of the synagogue. Perhaps some of you do not know what being put out of the synagogue means. I will tell you: I will illustrate it by a modern law. If you were a Roman Catholic, and you were to doubt the authority of what they call their church, that would put you out of the pale of the church, and putting you out of the pale of the church would put you away from God, and away from his favor, and you would be damned to all eternity. To be put out of the synagogue, therefore, was to be put out of the pale of the church, to be put out of God's favor, out of God's mercy; and such a man, thus shut out, was reckoned cursed both of man and of God. Now if the people had not depended upon the elders, they would not have done this, if they had judged for themselves. So, then, my hearer, judge for yourself; take the Bible which you have got in your house for yourself, and say, Does not this book faithfully tell me what I am as a sinner, and do I not feel and see that just what this book says, I am; and does not this book set forth a Savior; does not this book describe the Christian experience by which a saved soul is brought into the saving knowledge of the Lord? And does not this book contain a great many covenants? But is there not one covenant that is like Aaron's rod, that swallows up all the rest, a covenant ordered in all things and sure? and is not Jesus the Mediator of that covenant? Learn for yourselves, every man and every woman, and do not look to any minister, or any man or class of men; but judge for yourselves. The church of God is a congregational church, made up not of human organizations, but made up of individuals. So, then, I say the soul is in prison, the man is ignorant, and knows not what he hates. Think you that the Roman Catholics, when they put to death the saints of God, understood the religion of those men whom they were murdering? And so of Henry the Eighth, who would kill a man today for not believing one thing, and have another put to death tomorrow for believing it; and Queen Elizabeth would do the same; and the execrable Stuarts, especially James the First, who would put one man to death today for believing in predestination, and would put another man to death tomorrow for not believing in it. Such was the conduct of those infamous characters that once occupied the British throne. Now they did it in ignorance; they did not know what they were about. Here, then, is the state of the spirits of men

by nature, in spiritual death, darkness, unbelief, and enmity; this is the prison the spirits of men are in.

Secondly, I have to notice *how they are to be brought out of prison*. What is to be the remedy? Let us begin with the apostle's words; "I am ready to preach the gospel to you that are at Rome also. For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ; for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believes; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek." Now the first thing essential to salvation, to all intents and purposes, is regeneration, for "except a man be born again, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God;" and "if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his." There must be this spiritual life in the soul; "He that has begun the good work in you." What is this but spiritual and eternal life? The gospel of Christ is the power of God, bringing the dead into a spiritual life. Now what ceremony, what invention, what doing of man can minister one iota towards this? Will the sprinkling of a child on its forehead, or anywhere else, by a priest, as they now some of them delight to call themselves, quicken its soul, either at the time or afterwards? Does that enlighten its mind, and enable it as it grows up to see its lost and ruined condition, and to see the remedy, and to lead it to receive the remedy? Does that bring the soul out of death, and darkness, and unbelief, and enmity, into reconciliation with God? Just look at it! Not that I am afraid of their trumpety ceremony myself, or am afraid for one moment of any of you being deluded by it; but I just make the remark to show how much we have to be thankful for in being brought away from all human ceremonies into the living, solemn realities of the gospel of God. Hence it is that the word "toleration" is a word that has no business to exist in connection with Christianity. They say, "Oh, but they do tolerate you Dissenters." Who tolerates us? Here are two poor dying worms, and the one says to the other, "Well, I allow you to own that you are a sinner; I allow you to believe in Jesus Christ; I allow you to pray to God; I allow you to look to God; I allow you to praise God; I allow you to look to your Maker." You allow! And pray, poor creature, what are you going to do for yourself? Where do you get your authority for this? Will you show me a scripture? because you are assuming now what no prophet ever assumed; no prophet ever said to a seeking soul, Well, I tolerate you; I allow you to believe. No apostle ever said to any man, Well, we allow you to pray; we allow you to fear God; we allow you to look to God. Why, the apostle says, "We have no dominion over your faith; but are" merely "helpers together of your joy." Well, but, Peter, did you not allow a certain number of Gentiles to come out, and come to God? No, he says, "God, by my mouth, took out of the Gentiles a people for his name." I did not do it. I went and preached to the spirits that were in prison, and showed the kind of prison they were in, and the spirit of life set in, and those souls began to live, and began to pray, without asking anyone whether they might; and they began to believe in the truth, without asking anyone whether they might. And thus we are taught, even by such a text as this, that religion is a matter not only individual, but that it lies entirely between God and the soul; and the soul is as independent of man in that respect as though you were the only person in the whole range of existence. Therefore, let me say to all, if any are at all inclined to trust men, remember that "cursed is the man that trusts in man." "Cease from man," from human opinions; look to the Bible for yourself, according to its own direction, "To the law and to the testimony; if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them." Now in order to bring the spirits of men out of prison in the senses I have named, in order to bring them out of wrath, out of separation from God, and to bring them to God, what means are we to use? God's own word. The gospel of Christ is "the power of God unto salvation." And what weapons are we to use? I cannot imagine a sillier thing than to inflict corporeal punishment upon man in order to put his soul to rights. Why, the negative put by the judicial committee upon certain

practices of Puseyism lately, that will not convince the men that they are wrong, certainly not. It may perhaps cripple them a little, but it will not convince them; and you can never do anything with a man until he is convinced. The great plan is to convince a man, and then, when he is convinced of the truth, he wants no persuasion, but readily falls in with the truth, and says, May I receive the truth? May I hope in the truth? But without this personal conviction, without this understanding, there is no good done. This, then, is the essential to bring the soul out of prison; God by his word carries home conviction, and such become convinced; like those of old, when they were convinced, they cast all their curious books into the fire. When Saul of Tarsus was convinced, when God brought home the word with power, and showed him his interest in eternal things, what did he do? He did not confer with flesh and blood, but went immediately and preached that same gospel, to bring other prisoners out of prison, that had brought him out. He well knew that the Savior's mission was to open the prison-house to them that were bound, and to bring them that sat in darkness into the light of that sun that shall never go down. Now what are the weapons, then? The apostle says, "Our weapons are not carnal, but mighty through God." And strange as it may seem, paradoxical and unmilitary, shall I say, un-soldier like as it may appear, those weapons are to be used in love. I am to smite a sinner in love. "Let the righteous smite me; it shall be a kindness." We are to use those heavenly spiritual weapons, namely, the testimonies of the gospel, which are for the casting down of imaginations, and bringing down all strongholds of false confidence and Pharisaism, lay the sinner low at the Savior's feet, and bring into subjection every thought to the obedience of Christ; that that sinner when he is brought out of prison shall be in such a state that he shall not have a single thought against Christ. These weapons must be used in hatred to the elements that hold the soul fast, but in sincere affection to the soul. Ah, how often, where the preacher has thus borne his testimony, has God caused it to have a softening influence, and the sinner feels that he is spoken to in love! that though he is spoken to plainly and faithfully, he is spoken to in love; that the minister is not merely advocating a favorite creed, a favorite crotchet, a favorite point, but that he is proclaiming the truths of God in sincere affection to the souls of men. The apostle said, "We wrestle not against flesh and blood;" ours is not a flesh and blood warfare; "but against principalities Satanic principalities; whatever hides from you the substitutional work of Christ, that we must wrestle against; using holy weapons, using them in love, speaking the truth in love; and whatever hides from you, or has a tendency to do so, the sovereign pleasure of God in his eternal counsel, against that principality, that power, that spiritual wickedness in high places, that ruling darkness, we must wrestle. Ministers must stand for the enlightenment of the people. As Jesus did of old, as he does now; he is pleased to use one class of real Christians, whom we call ministers, to be made useful to another class of Christians, and to be the means of ingathering others; and thus, then, for eternal life, for eternal salvation, he still preaches to the spirits that are in prison, bringing them out, and dealing with them in a way that perhaps time will scarcely allow me to dwell upon this morning.

Now my object has been to show, though I am afraid I have failed in a great measure, that the prison being spiritual, the means of bringing the soul out of prison must be spiritual likewise. The Holy Scriptures never once attach the least spiritual or saving virtue to any of the sacrifices of the Old Testament, or to all of them put together. They were mere ceremonies; they were mere shadows. Now let me ask this assembly this morning, if God did not put, which he did not, any spiritual or saving efficacy into ordinances and ceremonies of his own appointing, how much less, think you, will he put spiritual life into ceremonies which men blindly, arrogantly, and daringly invent? And are not the Holy Scriptures point-blank against all human tradition? Does it not say,

“In vain do they worship me teaching for doctrines the precepts and the traditions of men.” Thus, then, we see the remedy. What a beautiful description have we of the way in which the spirits are brought out of prison in the 110th Psalm. That Psalm has been a favorite of mine for these forty-three years. I believe I could wake up in the middle of the night, and without a moment's notice go into the pulpit and preach a sermon upon that Psalm. “The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit you at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.” There is the prospective enthronement of the dear Savior. “The Lord shall send the rod of your strength out of Zion now that was not a literal rod, but a spiritual one. When did the Lord send out the rod of his strength? On the day of Pentecost. And how did that rod appear, the rod being the symbol of power? By the descent of the Holy Spirit; and thousands of spirits were on that day brought out of prison, never to go back to prison again; there is no going back again; “Your people shall be willing in the day of your power, in the beauties of holiness.” What brings them into the beauties of holiness? Answer, faith in Christ; in receiving Christ, you receive all the beauties of holiness. If you like, you may put another word into the place of the word “beauties,” for it means it; “Your people shall be willing in the blessings of holiness.” Nothing but curse followed sin, nothing but blessing will follow the end of sin; Christ having put an end to sin. And then comes the eternal priesthood of Christ “The Lord has sworn, and will not repent”, here is the immutability of our God, “You, are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.” He died once; he needs to die no more; the work is done, and done for ever; the spirits are delivered from prison, never to return to that prison again. Then it describes how the Lord would go forth and gather in others. “The Lord at your right hand shall strike through kings in the day of his wrath.” The kings there do not mean kings literally; they mean ruling powers; and so sin, unbelief, enmity, and error, have reigned over us, but our God is angry with these ruling powers, and so he strikes through them, and strikes them down to bring us up, strikes them dead to give us life, brings them into captivity to bring us out of captivity into the liberty of the gospel. “He shall judge among the heathen;” and what is that judgment? Go into all the world with this judgment; “he that believes shall be saved; he that believes not shall be damned.” That is his judgment. “He shall fill the places with the dead bodies;” that is a figurative expression. I hope I am speaking, this morning to a great many dead bodies. Yours is a strange congregation, then. Well, I hope I am speaking to a great many such. The apostle Paul shows you in the 7th of Romans how he was struck dead. What is meant by the dead bodies? Well, by faith in Christ they become dead to sin, to the law. to the world, and to death itself; in all these senses they are dead bodies. “He shall wound the heads over many countries;” heads there meaning ruling powers. “He shall drink of the brook in the way; therefore, shall he lift up the head.” Do not lose this, if you lose all besides. The 4th verse of the 18th of Proverbs will explain what is meant by his drinking of the brook in the way, and lifting up the head. “The words of a man’s mouth are as deep waters, and the wellspring of wisdom as a flowing brook and Christ so drank of the brook of wisdom that he never committed one folly; therefore, could he lift up his head, and say, “Which of you convinces me of sin?” Can you and I say this? No; but we can say something; we can say we have so drunk of the brook of wisdom as to know Jesus Christ, as to know that we are complete in him. And, therefore, as he lifted up his head in defiance of all his foes by virtue of his own purity and perfection, we can do the same, not by what we are, but by what we are in him, and by what he is for us; so that there we stand, and there the challenge is recorded, “Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect?” Thus, you see the nature of the prison, thus you see the way in which they are brought out. And I trust we know something of this. Do not let us get weary of the gospel; we want nothing else. Depend upon it, friends, as in nature, so in grace; some of the most valuable things are the most difficult to get at; and men do not like searching the Scriptures, and so they run

away to human amusements, or ceremonies, or something or another, something easier. But all, we may read again, again, and again; there is always something new, something fresh, something precious, in the Holy Scriptures.

Lastly, *what is to be done with the spirits of men when they are brought out of prison?* What will the Lord do with them? When he said, “You are come unto Mount Zion;” that is, not literally, but spiritually, “and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem;” the new Jerusalem, not the old Jerusalem; we will leave that to our good friend Dr. Cumming, when he can get the Jews back to it; we will take the new, and leave the old to him; the new Jerusalem, the city of the living God, the city which Abraham looked to, which has foundations, and where they need not the light of the sun, nor of a candle to shine, “for the glory of God does lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof.” “To the general assembly”, where is the general assembly? Christ is its center; all that are in heaven are assembled to him, and all that know him on earth are assembled to him; they are still holding him by the feet, as it were; the poor sinner by precious faith lays hold of his feet, still bathes his feet, still washes his feet, still anoints his feet, still lays hold of him; “I cannot let you go except you bless me.” And if you dispute this point, that he is the center, go to the 1st of Ephesians; “That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth, even in him; in whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who works all things after the counsel of his own will.” So he has got us pretty near to our inheritance now; presently, when the summons comes, it will be just a step out of the lower house into the upper house, and we shall be in full possession of the inheritance in the twinkling of an eye; “absent from the body, present with the Lord.” “To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven;” so you see they are eternal election people.