Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

Have you ever heard the saying, “**That’s** **just** **the pot calling the kettle black!**” The background of the saying is that when you put pots and kettles on an open flame, they slowly turn black from the carbon of the flames. And so, the saying has in view a pot criticizing a kettle for turning black, when the pot is just as black, itself. So, when a person accuses someone else of something that they themselves are guilty of, you say, “That’s just the pot calling the kettle black!” Well, in 2 Peter 3:16, Peter says, “*There are some things in [Paul’s letters] that are hard to understand*.” And in relation to verses 19-20 of our text, that seems to be a clear case of the pot calling the kettle black. For if this was your first time reading these verses, you are probably wondering what on earth Christ preaching to spirits in prison and disobedience in the days of Noah and the ark are all about. And look up every commentary on these verses, and you will see that they all identify these verses as some of the most difficult to interpret in the whole Bible.

But they are a part of Scripture. Peter, guided by the Holy Spirit, believed that what he said here was an important part of his instruction to Christians who suffer because of persecution and hardship. So, we need to consider these verses. And we won’t be able to get everything all plain, and neat and tidy, but we will be able to understand Peter’s major point in this part of his letter.

As we have seen in recent weeks, Peter is explaining what Christian living in a hostile and unbelieving world looks like. And last time we saw that believers must be prepared to suffer for doing what is good and right. Well, you might remember that we identified **the last part of chapter 2** **as the centre of Peter’s letter**. That is where all this instruction about Christian living is grounded in the person and work of the Lord Jesus. And believers were called to follow His example of being prepared to suffer injustice, even to the point of death. And it is the suffering of Christ that Peter returns to in our text. And *how*he does this is fascinating and important for our understanding of this passage.

So, today we consider our text and all its difficulties under this theme: **suffering believers must take courage from the good news of Christ’s resurrection**. And we will see this under two main headings today.

1. The first is the encouragement for suffering believers that arises out of verses 18 and 22, and what I am calling **the creedal parts** of this passage. Let me explain…
   1. When we read the passage, did it sound familiar at all? I am going to pick out some of the key parts in this passage and paraphrase them a wee bit to see if they remind you of anything: Christ suffered, died, rose again, ascended into heaven, and is at the right hand of God. Does that sound familiar? It sounds like the **Apostles’ Creed**, doesn’t it? Now, the Apostles’ Creed, as we know it, came 1-200 years after Peter’s letter. But many commentators believe that verses 18 and 22 are a hymn or a creed from the early church that eventually grew into the Apostles’ Creed. After all, think about how comforting and instructive reciting the Apostles’ Creed or Question and Answer 1 of the Heidelberg catechism is for you! So, it would make sense for Peter to encourage his original readers with words that would have been very familiar and perhaps even regularly recited in their worship services. Now, we don’t know for sure that they were recited as a creed in worship services, but they are creed-like. That is why I am calling then the creedal parts of this passage.
   2. So, let’s look at the wonderful truthes about the person and work of the Lord Jesus that are laid out in these verses:
      1. In verse 18 we read: “*For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God.*”
         1. And here Peter is reminding believers of the terrible suffering of the Lord Jesus, and what it accomplished for our salvation.
         2. In the Heidelberg Catechism, each line of the Apostles’ Creed is briefly explained. And Question 27 asks, “What do you understand by the [suffering of Christ]"? And the answer given is that “during His whole life on earth, but especially at the end, Christ sustained in body and soul the anger of God against [our sins]. This He did in order that, by His suffering as the only atoning sacrifice, He might set us free, body and soul, from eternal condemnation, and gain for us God's grace, righteousness, and eternal life.”
      2. Now, it wasn’t enough that Christ just suffer spiritual and physical anguish on the cross on our behalf. And that is because the punishment that sin deserves is death. So, Jesus **also needed to conquer death and the grave** in order to secure salvation and eternal life for believers. And so, the next part of verse 18 says of Christ: “*being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit*.”
         1. Now, this sermon could easily get very complicated if I told you about every possible interpretation of every phrase. And this is one example; the phrase “***in the spirit***” could mean several things, which all have merit. But the interpretation that I believe best fits here is that this is a reference to the next major thing that happened after Jesus died, which is that He rose again. And indeed, if you skip ahead to the end of verse 21, which is where Peter returns to the creed-like part of this passage, we see reference to the “*resurrection of Jesus Christ*.”
            1. You see, prior to coming to earth, the Lord Jesus existed in heaven as a spirit.
            2. But He left that realm to come to earth to live as a human being, or “*in the flesh*.” And so, the phrase, “*being put to death in the flesh*” means that Jesus, as fully human, really and truly died.
            3. But three days later, Jesus rose from the dead. And He rose with what Scripture calls “*a spiritual body*.” Because He was now going to return to heaven, His body could no longer just be an ‘in the flesh’ body; it needed to be ‘a spiritual body’ that was suited to or appropriate for heaven. And we see evidence of this in that after His resurrection, we read about Him appearing in a locked room and then vanishing again. Why? Because He now had a spiritual body that could appear and vanish, anywhere.
            4. And you know, **1 Corinthians 15:44** says that this will be true for all believers when Jesus comes again – the body that is buried is “*a natural [flesh] body; it is raised a spiritual body*.” And if you look down at **4:6**, that verse also talks about the death and resurrection of believers. And it speaks of the resurrection as “*Liv[ing] in the spirit the way God does*.” So, when the Lord Jesus comes again and your body rises from the grave, it will change into a spiritual body that is suited to heaven.
         2. But the key point here is that having conquered death by His resurrection, Jesus has secured salvation and eternal life for believers. Question 45 of the Heidelberg Catechism asks: “**How does Christ's resurrection benefit us**?” And the answer is: “… by His resurrection He has overcome death, so that He might make us share in the righteousness He won for us by His death … [and] Christ's resurrection is [also] a guarantee of our glorious resurrection.”
      3. And then, the last part of this creed-like encouragement is **verse 22**, where, having returned to the resurrectionofJesusChrist, Peter says that Christ “*has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to Him*.”
         1. And the Heidelberg Lord’s Days that consider these aspects of the person and work of Christ explain that **His ascension to heaven** benefits us in that “He pleads our cause in heaven in the presence of His Father [and] … we have our own flesh in heaven; a guarantee that Christ our head will take us, His members, to Himself in heaven.”
         2. And **His being at the right hand of God** reveals to us that “He is head of His church, and that the Father rules all things through him.” And, from heaven, “He pours out His gifts … upon us His members [and] … defends us and keeps us safe from all enemies.”
   3. Now, we will turn in a moment to verses 19-21 and the second part of the text, but I want to make one point of application here. Brothers and sisters, try and imagine that you are facing persecution for being a follower of Jesus Christ. Perhaps you even are in prison. And we have spoken many times of Pastor Wang Yi in China, who is in exactly that position – in prison just because He is a Christian. So, he can’t hear the preaching of the Word every Lord’s Day; no livestreams or Bible studies or podcasts. What do you think he thinks about for encouragement? What would you think about for encouragement, given that you probably will not have a Bible to read? Well, hopefully, you have **memorized some Scripture**. And memorizing Scripture is well worth doing for every-day Christian living but especially for times of persecution. And I have included a link to a booklet about memorizing Scripture in the bulletin. I recommend you download and print off a copy. But a good many of you, because you have recited the words many, many times, will have **memorized the Apostles’ Creed**. And, as we have seen, it is basically a summary of Scripture truthes like the ones in our text. And as you go through each of the simple phrases of the Apostles’ Creed, you can unpack them and meditate on them, and be encouraged by the truth that Jesus Christ suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; He descended into hell; the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father, Almighty; from there He shall come to judge the living and the dead. [And] I believe in the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.” What powerful encouragement! And I hope that each one of you believes these great truthes about your Saviour, Jesus Christ.
2. But turning now to our second point, we want to see the encouragement for suffering believers that arises out of verses 19-21, and what I am calling **the Noah’s Ark** part of our passage. Let me explain…
   1. Those of you who know the Apostles’ Creed will know that it does not say anything about Christ proclaiming to spirits in prison and Noah and the ark and baptism. So, what is this all about? Why did Peter include all this here? Well, as ever, let’s begin with what we know about **Peter** and **the people that he originally wrote this letter to**. A few pages on from 1 Peter we find the Book of Jude. It was written around the same time as 1 Peter and they have very similar language and themes. And Jude refers to a prophecy of Enoch that he then quotes from. Now, the prophecy of Enoch that he quotes from is a book known as **the Book of Enoch**. It was written around 1-200 years before Christ was born. And there are allusions to it also in Matthew, Luke, Romans, Hebrews, and Revelation. And if you are wracking your brains trying to remember where the Book of Enoch is in the Bible, it is not! The Book of Enoch *is not Scripture* and rightly so. And we don’t have time today to get into why that is the case, but, as one church historian explains, “it was a great favourite in the [early] Christian church,” and what it said about biblical events was viewed as generally accurate and trustworthy. So, the Book of Enoch would have been well-known to Peter and to the people that he originally wrote this letter to. And I will explain why that is helpful to know in a moment.
   2. But we are about to get into a part of Scripture about which the great reformer, **Martin Luther**, said, “A wonderful text is this, and a more obscure passage perhaps than any other in the Testament, so that I do not know for a certainty just what Peter means.” And faithful and godly preachers have different explanations of some of the things in these verses that all have some merit. So, I do not claim to have the definitive interpretation of these verses. In fact, I used to hold to a different interpretation of them than I do now. But these differences do not affect the key point of this passage. So, we can allow for these different interpretations and still be united on how these words are an encouragement for suffering believers. But we still have to do the mahi – the hard work of walking through these verses.
      1. **Verse 19** begins with “*in which He went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison*.” And we immediately have **three questions**: What does “*in which He went*” refer to? What did Jesus *proclaim*? And who are “*the spirits in prison*” that He proclaimed to? And I am not going to give you all the possibilities or we could be here for the rest of the day. If this sermon peaks your interest in these things, grab some commentaries and dive in a little deeper. I will just give you the interpretation that I think best fits, and explain why I think that is the case, so that we can get to the key point at the end.
         1. “***In which He went***” is the state of having a spiritual body that we talked about in relation to the end of verse 18. So, after the resurrection but before He ascended to heaven, Jesus, *with His spiritual body*, went and proclaimed …
         2. And **what did He proclaim**? Well, we will have to come back to that in a minute because to answer that question, we first need to consider who those are that He proclaimed to.
         3. So, who are “**the spirits in prison**”? Well, these are not humans but fallen angels who are in a prison.
            1. And I say this because humans are never referred to just as “spirits” in the Bible. If they are referred to as “spirits,” words are always added to make it clear that humans are in view. For example, **Hebrews 12:23** talks about “*the spirits of righteous men made perfect*.” So, that is a clear reference to humans. But whenever the reference is just to spirits, it is always angels that are in view.
            2. And other Bible verses help us see that the angels in view here are ***fallen*** angels.

For example, just a few pages over in **2 Peter 2:4-5**, we read, “*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*.” And then Peter continues on to talk there also about Noah and the flood, just as he does here.

And in **Jude 6**, we read, “*And the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, He has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day*.”

* + - * 1. So, “*the spirits in prison*” that Christ went and proclaimed to after His resurrection were fallen angels.
    1. And as we come to **verse 20**, we see why and when these fallen angels were cast into this prison. There we read, “*Because they formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared*.” So, their being in prison is linked to the times that led up to Noah’s ark that we read about earlier in the service.
       1. So, turn back to **Genesis 6** again. There we read,

*When man began to multiply on the face of the land and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive. And they took as their wives any they chose. Then the LORD said, "My Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years." The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of man and they bore children to them. These were the mighty men who were of old, the men of renown.*”

* + - 1. These are the events that Peter is referring to. The “***sons of God***” there are fallen or evil angels. And ‘sons of God’ does not mean beloved child, as in the Lord Jesus or believers, but simply ‘beings directly created by God,’ as all the angels were. In **Job 1:6**, for example, we read, “*Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them*.” So, the Bible refers to all the angels, including the fallen angels, as “*sons of God*” – beings directly created by God.
      2. So, what happened in Genesis 6 is that fallen angels lusted after human women. And the fallen angels entered into human beings who became what the Bible calls demon possessed. And these demon possessed men married and produced exceptionally evil and wicked offspring, such that, as we see in verse 5, “*The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually*.” And if you look down at verse 11, we see that the earth was “*filled with violence*,” and in verse 12, there was total corruption, such that the Lord decided to destroy the world with a flood.
      3. And in the 120 odd years before the flood came, Noah warned the people of the coming flood. But no one, except 7 other members of his family, listened and repented and believed. And so, when the flood came, the rest of humanity, including the demon possessed ones that we have spoken about, were swept away and died.
      4. And because of their role in producing this demon possessed generation; this refusal of these fallen angels to stay, as Jude says, *“within their own position of authority, [and their leaving] their proper dwelling”* to intrude into human life in this grossly immoral and wicked way, these fallen angels were cast into this prison, where they must remain forever until they are cast into hell on Judgment Day.
      5. A moment ago, I quoted **Job 1:6** when the sons of God presented themselves before God, including Satan. And we read, “*The LORD said to Satan, "From where have you come?" Satan answered the LORD and said, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it."*” So Satan and the other fallen angels have a kind of freedom to go to and fro on the earth as they cause their mischief. But that freedom was taken away from the fallen angels who did what we read about in Genesis 6, and they were cast into the prison.
      6. And this prison is **an awful place**. In the Gospels, we read about a time when Jesus healed a demon possessed man. And when Jesus asked the man for his name, he replied, “‘*Legion,’ for many demons had entered him.*” And this is what we read next: “*And [the demons] begged [Jesus] not to command them to depart into the abyss*.” You see, they knew that what they had done was similar to what happened in Genesis 6 and that they were in danger of the same punishment. So, this prison is an awful place.
    1. Now, if you have fallen off your chair and are wondering if I am now two cuckoos short of a clock with this whole ‘fallen angels in prison thing,’ this is where **the Book of Enoch** that I told you about earlier comes in. And I don’t have time to read the whole relevant section of it, but you can Google it and start reading it yourself from chapter 6 if you want to. And you will find there an expansion or commentary on what we read in Genesis 6. You will read the names of some of the fallen angels who did this wicked deed with human wives. You will read how they taught their wives and children witchcraft and astrology and cannibalism and bestiality, and how they began to slaughter animals and humans, such that the blood cried out to God in heaven. And you will read how they were punished by being cast into the place of darkness to abide there until on the day of the great judgement they “shall be cast into the fire.”
       1. And remember that the Book of Enoch “was a great favourite in the [early] Christian church,” and that what it said about biblical events was viewed as generally accurate and trustworthy.
       2. So, these words of Peter would not have been nearly as mysterious and difficult to his original audience as they first appear to us. What Peter said here was the well-known and generally accepted and popular understanding of Genesis 6. Fallen angels had sinned with human women and were punished by being sent to a prison.
    2. And that brings us back to **what Christ proclaimed to these** “**spirits in prison**.” It was a **declaration of His victory and triumph over sin and the grave**.
       1. We can imagine that news of Jesus’ death had filtered down to these fallen angels in this prison. And perhaps they were celebrating what seemed like an incredible victory, and maybe even thinking about the possibility of being released from their ‘hell-hole’? But then, who should appear among them, in His glorious, spiritual body? The risen and conquering Jesus who declared His victory and their certain condemnation!
  1. So, can you see, now, brothers and sisters, how these words would have been a powerful encouragement for these suffering believers? For 120 years, almost no one listened to the preaching of Noah. In fact, just 8 human beings were rescued in the Ark from 120 years of human and demonic life and wickedness. But God preserved those 8 people from their enemies and even punished the fallen angels who were behind the wickedness and suffering. So, Peter’s message to his original audience was that just as the forces of wickedness could not crush the small ‘church’ of Noah’s day and were punished for their wickedness, so the forces of wickedness will not crush you – the small church today. And you have even greater reason for hope and encouragement because Jesus Christ is the risen and conquering Lord of glory! And you and me as the church of Christ today have that same hope and encouragement. A time may come when we are persecuted and imprisoned and even killed, but Christ will build His church!
  2. And that is the major point of **verse 21 as we draw to a close**: “*Baptism, which corresponds to this [rescue in the ark], now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience*.” And Peter is not saying here that being baptized with water saves a person. And the rest of Scripture is clear about that also; it is repentance and faith in Christ that saves us. His point here is that just as being in the ark saved the 8 people of Noah’s day from the waters of judgment, so spiritual baptism, being united with Christ, will save us from eternal condemnation. Believer, you have no need to fear Judgment Day. If you have truly repented of your sins and believed in Jesus Christ for forgiveness of your sins, then you will be welcomed by Him into heaven on that day. And you have your baptism with water as a visible sign and seal of your standing before God.

Your God wants you to live with confidence and hope and encouragement, even in times of persecution and hardship. And you may have this hope and confidence and encouragement because Christ suffered and died and rose again and has ascended to heaven where He reigns in glory! So, look to Christ, always, and especially when you suffer. Amen.