

Source Text Interpreted for “the clause”, “descent into hell”, from the Apostles Creed

1 Peter 3:19: the spirits in prison

I Peter 3:18-20

*“For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; in which also He went and made proclamation **to the spirits in prison, who once were disobedient, when the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah** while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water.”*

What are these “*spirits in prison*”? Many people reading the word “*spirits*” in this passage translate it in their minds to dead people that supposedly live now (as spirits) in a prison. Such an understanding however is not founded on the **Word of God**, and here is why: the **Word of God** does not use the word “*spirit*” to denote dead, non-resurrected, men. To understand what are the spirits in prison, we need to look at the **Word of God** and see how it uses this word plus to take into consideration other references of the Bible on the subject described in the above verses of I Peter. For indeed the **Word of God** speaks not in just one but in four different places about what I Peter 3:19 speaks about. But first of all, let’s see what could these spirits in prison be. As we said, they could NOT be dead men. Despite the fact that our age uses the word spirit for dead men that are supposedly living somewhere without resurrection, the Bible does not use this word with such a meaning. It does however use this word to denote angelic beings. As Hebrews 1:13-14 says:

Hebrews 1:13-14

“But to **which of the angels** has He ever said, Sit on my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool? **Are they not all ministering SPIRITS**, sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation?”

and some verses earlier:

Hebrews 1:7

“And of the angels He says: **“Who makes His angels SPIRITS** And His ministers a flame of fire.””

Angelic beings were created by God and they are spirit beings. They are “*spirits*”. Could then be that these “*spirits in prison*” are fallen angels in prison? As we will see yes this is what it is. But let’s first get some background information. As we saw angels are spirit beings. Though all of them were created by God not all remained with God. Some of them rebelled against Him and were fallen from their position. The chief fallen angel is the devil or Satan. Two passages that describe his rebellion and fall are: Ezekiel 28:11-19 and Isaiah 14:3-23. However, the above passage of I Peter 3:19 does not refer to this fall. I Peter 3:20 sets the time to the “days of Noah”. The devil had rebelled long before those days as we see him active in the garden of Edem. Besides that, he and his angels are not in a prison now. Instead the devil is described as “prince of the **air**” and he and his fallen angels as “principalities ... powers ... rulers of the darkness of this age ... spiritual hosts of wickedness **in the heavenly places**”. Spiritual hosts of wickedness are literally hosts of wicked spirits –and this is what fallen angels are - that are now active in the heavenly places. I Peter 3:19 therefore does not refer to the devil’s fall but to another rebellion of angels that occurred “*in the days of Noah*” and before the Flood. These fallen spirits ended up in a prison and we will read more on this in II Peter and in Jude. But let’s first go to **Genesis 6**, just before the Flood. We will find there details about the fall of these angels.

Genesis 6:1-8

“Now it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born to them, that the **sons of God** saw the daughters of men, that they were beautiful; and they took wives for themselves of all whom they chose. And the LORD said, “My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, for he is indeed flesh; yet his days shall be one hundred and twenty years.” **There were giants on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men and they bore children to them.**

Those were the mighty men who were of old, men of renown. Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that He had

made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. So the LORD said, "I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast, creeping thing and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them." But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD."

There was something that happened when man started multiplying. The "sons of God" saw the daughters of men and took wives from them. See that verse 1 puts in contrast the men and the **daughters of men** with the **sons of God**. "The sons of God saw the daughters of men", we read. Who were these sons of God? Although the believers in the New Testament have been given authority by believing in the Lord Jesus Christ and in His resurrection from the dead to become sons and daughters of God, this was not something that was available in the Old Testament. The term "sons of God" is used 3 more times in the Old Testament, in addition to Genesis 6. In all cases it denotes angelic beings. Let's see these occurrences, all from the book of Job.

Job 1:6

"Now there was a day when the **sons of God** came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them."

and in a very similar reference: Job 2:10

"Again there was a day when the **sons of God** came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan came also among them to present himself before the LORD."

The sons of God that presented themselves before the Lord were obviously angels.

Also Job 38:7 speaking about the earth:

"To what were its foundations fastened? Or who laid its cornerstone, When the morning stars sang together, **and all the sons of God shouted for joy?**"

What Job 38:7 describes, refers to the creation of the earth when no human being was present. But the sons of God, the angels, were present and shouted for joy.

In short the beings of Genesis 6:1 were not human beings. Otherwise they would not be put in contrast with the daughter of men. There was and there is nothing wrong or strange for men to get married and have children. But this is not what happened in Genesis 6. What we have in **Genesis 6** is that non-human beings, angelic beings, sons of God – not sons of men – saw the daughter of men and desired them and furthermore they had children with them! As the Bible tells us in Genesis 6:4, the result of this union were the giants, a race of beings that God had not created nor He intended to create but were instead product of this ungodly union between angels and men. Noah was present at those days. These were "*the days of Noah*" and to these days I Peter 3:19 refers to.

To the same events we have further references in the New Testament. Let's see them, starting from II Peter 2:4-5, 9

II Peter 2:4-5, 9

"For if **God did not spare the angels who sinned, but cast them down to hell and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment;** and did not spare the ancient world, but saved Noah, one of eight people, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood on the world of the ungodly; ... the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations and to reserve the unjust under punishment for the day of judgment,"

The phrase "*cast them down to hell*" is one word in the Greek text the verb "ταρταρώ" (tartaroo) and it means "*to cast down to Tartarus*". As Bullinger says: "Tartarus" is a Greek word not used elsewhere or at all in the Septuaginta. Homer describes it as subterranean. The Homeric Tartarus is the prison of the Titans, or giants, who rebelled against Zeus" (The Companion Bible, Appendix 131). And as Vine also explains: "*the verb tartaroo, translated "cast down to hell" in 2 Peter 2:4 signifies to consign to Tartarus, which is neither Sheol nor Hades nor Hell, but the place where those angels whose special sin is referred to in that passage are confined "to be reserved unto judgement;" the region is described as pits of darkness*" (Vine's dictionary, p. 553). Tartarus is to be understood therefore as a prison and in this prison, as Peter says, were cast the angels that sinned, to be reserved in judgment. They are in this prison of darkness reserved for the day of judgment. See that what follows this reference of II Peter is *Noah and the reference to the Flood*. This is not accidental as both these events are connected and happened not long from each other. But let's also see the evidence from Jude who also speaks about the same subject:

Jude 6-7

“And the angels who did not keep their proper domain, but left their own habitation, **He has reserved in everlasting chains under darkness for the judgment of the great day**; as Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities around them in a similar manner to these, having given themselves over to fornication and **gone after strange flesh**, are set forth as an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire.”

Jude speaks about the same rebellion as Peter and Genesis. Sometime during the *times of Noah*, angels “*left their own habitation*” and went after “*strange flesh*”, after the **daughters of men**. The result? They are now “*reserved in everlasting chains under darkness for the judgement of the great day*.” This is the prison, the Tartarus that Peter speaks about in his letters. **To these fallen spirits, fallen angels, spirits in prison, Jesus went and preached, says the KJV. The NKJV has this translated better as “made proclamation”.**

Now the text does not say what He proclaimed. But I agree with what Vine is saying in his dictionary, when he speaks about the word “*kerusso*” that is translated in I Peter 3:19 as “*made proclamation*” “**to publish, proclaim openly: something which has been done**”:

“In I Peter 3:19 the probable reference is, *not to glad tidings* but to the act of Christ after His resurrection in **proclaiming His victory to fallen angelic beings**” (Vine’s expository dictionary of New Testament words, page 883, emphasis added).

To conclude therefore: when in I Peter 3:19 we read that Jesus went and *preached* to the *spirits in prison*, we should not read into it dead people living in a prison, without resurrection, and Jesus going to them to preach the good news. What the **Word of God** is speaking in I Peter 3:19 is not about dead people but about *spirits, angelic beings* that are in a prison, *in the Tartarus, bound in everlasting chains under darkness*. **Why?** Because of what they did *in the times of Noah*, leaving their own habitation, giving themselves over to fornication and going after “*strange flesh*”, after the daughters of men.

E. W. Bullinger: The Companion Bible, 1990, Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, Michigan