

# Who are the spirits in prison?

written by Alfred Persson | April 10, 2022



**Who are these “spirits in prison”?**

*18 For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit,*

*19 by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison,*

*20 who formerly were disobedient [disbelieving: 544 ἀπειθέω apeitheo], when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water.*

*21 There is also an antitype which now saves us— baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,*

*22 who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him. (1 Pet. 3:18-22 NKJ)*

*544 ἀπειθέω apeitheo {ap-i-theh'-o}*

*Meaning: 1) not to allow one's self to be persuaded 1a) to refuse or withhold belief 1b) to refuse belief and obedience 2) not to comply with. -Strong's Concordance*

In the *Exegetical Summary of 1 Peter* appears a list of the different ways modern commentaries answer this question:

**QUESTION—Who are the spirits he is referring to?**

1. They are the spirits of the people of Noah's generation [Alf, ICC, TG, TNTC; NJB, TEV].

2. They are supernatural beings.

2.1 They are fallen angels [NTC].

2.2 They are the fallen angels of Genesis 6:1–4 who married human women and had offspring by them [BNTC, EGT, IVP, NCBC, NIBC, NIC, Sel].

2.3 They are evil spirit beings who are the spiritual offspring of the fallen angels of Genesis 6:1–4 who married human women and had offspring by them [WBC].

-Abernathy, D. (2008). *An Exegetical Summary of 1 Peter* (2nd ed., p. 137). SIL International.

Answer #1 is impossible because Scripture never refers to unregenerate humans as "spirits." Only Believers who partake of the "divine nature of God" (2 Pet. 1:4) thereby regenerated (Tit. 3:5) have "spirits" that can be grouped with angelic spirits under the heading of what springs from God, the "sons of Elohim" (Gen. 6:2). For example, the "spirits of the prophets" (1 Cor. 14:32) or "spirits of just men made perfect" (Heb. 12:23) are children of God (Jn. 1:13; 1 Pt. 1:22). None of the humans Noah preached to could have been classed among this group for if they were they would not have ended up in a prison in hell (Gen. 25:8; Lk. 16:22).

Answer #2 is ruled out by context, Noah preached to these πνεύμασιν therefore they can't be "unclean spirits" (Mk. 1:27; Lk. 4:36; 1 Ti. 4:1),

Both Answer #2.1 and 2.2 are also ruled out by the context. Christ would not preach to fallen angels. The πνεύμασιν Christ preached to "gave the answer of a good conscience towards God" thus reversing their "disobedience brought on by disbelief (544 ἀπειθέω apeitheo) and so becoming an antitype to how belief manifested during baptism now "saves us". Moreover, Peter locates the sinning angels of Genesis 6:1-4 as still in hell, in "chains of darkness in Tartarus" (2 Pt. 2:4) . Finally, the context of 1 Peter 3:18-22 implies these are the captives Christ led "in his train" (Eph. 4:8-10) when He "took captivity captive and gave gifts to men" in heaven and on earth. These spirits now having believed went with Christ when He had "gone into heaven" as all "angels and authorities and powers" were made subject to Him (1 Pt. 3:22).

Answer 2.3 is also impossible. Evil spirit beings would not suffer Noah's preaching.

**The Commentaries missed another possibility, the "spirits in prison" are the "good spirit beings" the offspring of both the Nephilim (fallen Ones) and the "sons of God" who were blameless other than refusing to believe Noah's preaching God would forgive their angel-human nature which**

**defiled the image of God in man, an abomination.**

These spirits were a “special case” and therefore kept separate from human dead and their angelic fathers and put in a separate “prison.” This is why Christ made a special trip proclaiming the truth of the gospel that God’s Mercy and Forgiveness also applied to them, that God would indeed forgive their nature, a sin they had no control over.

As for the angelic “Sons of God”, because they did not join Satan’s rebellion but sinned leaving their own habitation (Jude 1:6-7), they were separated from demons who were cast into the tormenting abyss (Lk. 8:31; Rev. 9:1-12); they went to Tartarus and chained in darkness (2 Pet. 2:4)

So the “spirits in prison” are the “men of renown” (Gen. 6:4) also called “Titans” in Greek mythology, who died physically in the Flood—Genesis 7:21-23 thrice emphasizes “all ...that was on dry land died”.

As they are unique Christ made a special trip to their prison (5438 φυλακή phulake) to proclaim God’s offer of salvation. This time they believed the preaching “giving the answer of a good conscience”. How do we know this? The context. Only obedience to Christ’s preaching could cause Peter associate His preaching with Noah’s preaching and the flood with Baptism, where “the like figure” of all who respond with belief are saved, having given the “answer of a good conscience to God”.

As we learned from the parable of “Dives and Lazarus” the righteous dead before the New Covenant were gathered to their people by angels and didn’t require relocation when Christ ascended into heaven (Gen. 25:8; Lk. 16:22). Therefore, only this special group of believers went to “paradise” when Christ ascended to heaven.

*7 But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift.*

*8 Therefore He says: “When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, And gave gifts to men.”*

*9 (Now this, “He ascended “– what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth?*

*10 He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.) (Eph. 4:7-10 NKJ)*

**Corroborating is how foreign and antithetical to the context a “proclamation of doom to the damned” would be, especially when the entire event is seen as an antitype forerunner to how the church is saved by belief in God publicly declared during Baptism. Confirming this is correct is its 100% consistency with Peter’s teaching angels sinned in Noah’s day (2 Pet. 2:4) having sexually “gone after strange flesh” (Jude 1:6-7)**

As for the “wicked men of renown” who died in the flood, and the spirits of Nephilim demons (cf, πνεύματα δαιμονίων (Rev. 16:14) who were denied re-entry into heaven when the flood came, and died physically in the

flood but who were not cast into the Abyss—[likely because they did not sire children corrupting the image of God in man]—these became the “unclean spirits” and “spirits of demons” (Rev. 16:14) who wander the earth desperately seeking a return to corporeality by possessing insects (2Kings 1:2) animals and men (Lk. 8:27-32; Compare “nakedness” 2 Cor. 5:2-4).

## END NOTES

[1]

Our LORD Jesus is fully God and fully man, The Eternal Son of God and Son of Man. His Person subsisting in two natures. Only Christ’s human nature is affected here, put to death in the flesh but made alive in the Spirit. Only the fleshly body died, not His human soul.

From the *Theology of the Old Testament*:

### Body, Soul, Spirit

Man, like all beings endowed with life, originated from two elements,—namely, from earthly material (אֲדָמָה, אֲרָצָה), and from the Divine Spirit (רוּחַ), Gen. 2:7, comp. Ps. 104:29 f., 146:4. As in general אֲנִיָּה, soul, originates in the אֲדָמָה, the flesh, by the union of spirit with matter, so in particular the human soul arises in the human body by the breathing of the divine breath (רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים אֲנִיָּה) into the material frame of the human body. But although the life-spring of the אֲנִיָּה, from which the soul arises, is common to man and beast, both do not originate from it in the same way. The souls of animals arise, like plants from the earth, as a consequence of the divine word of power, Gen. 1:24 (אֲנִיָּה אֲרָצָה אֲנִיָּה). Thus the creating spirit which entered in the beginning, 1:2, into matter, rules in them; their connection with the divine spring of life is through the medium of the common terrestrial creation. But the human soul does not spring from the earth; it is created by a special act of divine inbreathing; see 2:7 in connection with 1:26. The human body was formed from the earth before the soul; in it, therefore, those powers operate which are inherent to matter apart from the soul (a proposition which is of great importance, as Delitzsch rightly remarks). But the human body is still not an animated body; the powers existing in the material frame are not yet comprehended into a unity of life; the breath of life is communicated to this frame directly from God, and so the living man originates...

Thus the substance of the human soul is the divine spirit of life uniting itself with matter...

(4). But as the soul sprang from the spirit, the אֲנִיָּה, and contains the substance of the spirit as the basis of its existence, the soul exists and lives also only by the power of the אֲנִיָּה; in order to live, the soul which is called into existence must remain in connection with the source of its life. “God’s spirit made me” (רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים אֲנִיָּה), says Job. 33:4, “and the breath of the Almighty animates me” (רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים אֲנִיָּה אֲנִיָּה, with the imperfect). The first sentence expresses the way in

which the human soul is called into being; the second, the continuing condition of its subsistence. By the withdrawing of the □□□□ the soul becomes wearied and weak, till at last in death it becomes a shadow, and enters the kingdom of the dead (comp. § 78); while by the □□□□ streaming in, it receives vital energy. With this explanation the Old Testament usage in connection with the terms □□□□□□ and □□□□□ becomes intelligible. – Oehler, G. F., Day, G. E. (1883). Theology of the Old Testament (pp. 149–151). New York; London: Funk & Wagnalls.

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