

## **“Imperishable Truth”**

*Reading: John 14:15-21; 1 Peter 3:13-22*

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

Genesis 6 begins with these words: “When human beings began to increase in number on the earth and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that the daughters of humans were beautiful, and they married any of them they chose. Then the LORD said, ‘My Spirit will not contend with humans forever, for they are mortal; their days will be a hundred and twenty years.’ The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also afterward—when the sons of God went to the daughters of humans and had children by them. They were the heroes of old, men of renown. The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. The LORD regretted that He had made human beings on the earth, and His heart was deeply troubled. So the LORD said, ‘I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created...for I regret that I have made them.’” And then begins the story of Noah and the flood.

There are a lot of things in that story that are very unclear. Who are these “sons of God”? Who are the Nephilim? What is their relationship to God’s decision to destroy the world with a flood? It’s an extremely old story and we assume that there are things in it that have simply been lost to time, but we get these tantalizing hints that there must have been more going on than we know.

In fact, people have thought just that for thousands of years, and different people have tried their hand at filling in some of those gaps. One of the more successful ancient stories is the legend of the Watchers, which tells of how a group of angels known as the Watchers rebelled against God, descended to earth, intermarried with humans, taught humanity all kinds of dark arts, and produced monstrous giantish offspring called the Nephilim. The results were so bad that God had to resort to extreme measures, and so He flooded the earth to cleanse it from its evil and cast the rebellious angels into a sealed pit to be imprisoned for their crimes. Noah and his family, of course, remained faithful to God, survived the flood, and became a new beginning for the human race.

That whole version of the flood story with the angels and the giants was a pretty popular one around the time Peter was writing the letter that we know as 1 Peter. Lots of ancient writers knew about those rebellious angels being locked up in a pit somewhere in the wilderness, and so the Watchers became a common example of how not to live your life. Those rebellious angels were often mentioned in the same breath as the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah: ancient, legendary examples of those who rebelled against God and came to a bad end.

That version of the flood story is a part of Peter’s message in our passage for today. Remember that this letter is laying out for us the imperishable hope we have in Christ because of His resurrection from the dead, and how that imperishable hope guides us as we live in a perishable world. What does our eternal, incorruptible hope imply about our relations with those who don’t have that hope? Do we keep our eyes on our pie-in-the-sky hope of life in heaven after we die? Or do we fight in the here and now to bring heaven to earth? Again and again, Peter points us to the example of Jesus. “Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His steps.” It’s not the option we might have chosen, but Peter stands firm: death comes before resurrection, suffering comes before glory, the cross comes before the empty tomb. And here he is

expanding the image: the waters of the flood are both judgment and salvation, they both kill and cleanse, and our baptism into the community of Christ likewise signals our drowning and new birth.

And so the call is this: “All of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. For, ‘Whoever would love life and see good days must keep their tongue from evil and their lips from deceitful speech. They must turn from evil and do good; they must seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and His ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.’” Overcome evil with good, as Paul puts it. Anyone can do evil in response to evil, and anyone can do good in response to good. But it takes an imperishable source of hope to be willing to do good in response to evil. Peter admits that there is a purely practical reason for this, since he and the rest of the church are in a position of being persecuted and marginalized by their world: if you’re doing good, you’re taking away their reasons to harm you. People still may not like you, and they may not trust you, but it takes a special breed of horrible person to want to hurt someone who’s doing all kinds of good things for others.

However, Peter is fully aware of the fact that there are all kinds of horrible people in the world, and so it’s still quite possible that they’ll make Christians suffer in spite of their good deeds. And here’s where it gets easy to lose what Peter’s saying if we’re not paying attention. “Even if you should suffer for what is right, *you are blessed.*” Do not be afraid; our hope is imperishable. What really counts is God’s judgment on our lives, and so whether we are comfortable or suffering is of less eternal consequence than our faithfulness to the call God has placed on our lives. Our blessing on their curses brings shame on them and credit to us in God’s eyes.

And then comes an often quoted and often misunderstood verse: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.” When he speaks of “giving an answer,” the sense of the verb is to give a defense, as though you’re in court or in a debate and have to make a strong case for your position. Usually when I’ve heard that verse quoted, I’ve heard it quoted all by itself and out of its context, and usually the point is to instruct us to make sure we can win in a debate against an atheist. Not only do you need to know Christ personally, you need to know all the logical arguments, the theological arguments, the scientific arguments, and the historical arguments that you might need if someone raises an objection to your faith. You need to be prepared to give an answer. And that’s certainly not bad advice; there are good, reasonable arguments supporting our faith, and we definitely need solid Christian thinkers who can articulate those reasons and can engage with the debates raised by others. It’s known as apologetics, this engagement with the objections of non-Christians, and for many centuries it has been a worthwhile pursuit.

But that’s not really the point of what Peter is saying here. That point about apologetics doesn’t really fit in the flow of the rest of what Peter is saying. It is true that, in a sense, each of us is being regularly evaluated with respect to our faith in Christ. It is true that there is an ongoing debate or trial, and it is true that we need to be prepared to have an answer in that trial. But the nature of that answer is not necessarily a logical argument, it’s a life lived in the example of Christ.

Peter tells, once again, the story of what Jesus did. The Righteous One suffered for the sake of the unrighteous, to bring us to God. He was killed by humans and raised to glorious life by the Spirit. And then we get to an interesting bit: “after being made alive, He went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits — to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built.” It appears as though Peter is referring to those Watchers, those rebellious angels locked up for their disobedience. We don’t have to accept the legend Peter is referring to in order to accept his point: he’s using those angels as a familiar example of those who rebelled against God, and Jesus, in His death and resurrection for us, is the one who has been faithful to God. In other words, the faithful one — Jesus — shows that He has been vindicated in His actions by being given the opportunity to preach to the faithless ones, the imprisoned angels.

In the original story, Noah was contrasted with those angels because he obeyed God and was saved through the waters of the flood. Peter draws a comparison to us today: when you are baptized into Christ, you also pass through the waters and are saved by your declaration of faithfulness to God. So what’s the connection between all these scattered ideas, between Noah and Jesus and angels and giving an answer to those who want a reason for the hope we have? It is this: a life lived faithfully to God, lived trusting in Christ’s resurrection, lived by doing self-giving good in response to vindictive evil is itself a powerful answer to those who question our hope. There’s certainly a time and a place for making a reasonable, logical argument for our faith, but in the larger sense, the most important answer we can give is our lives. All the rational arguments in the world can easily be dismissed if our lives don’t line up with what we claim. And at the same time, even if you can’t articulate a good argument to defend your faith, if you live like Christ lived, it’s tough for people to deny that there’s something different about you.

Jesus was questioned about His mission, His allegiance, His hope. Though He had done miraculous good things, He was put on trial and ordered to defend Himself. And yet the only answer He gave was His life willingly given so that those who killed Him could come to God. And because of this, then, the one who had been put on trial now goes before a prison full of rebellious angels and gives His answer: while they had been disobedient and chose their own way rather than obeying God, Jesus was faithful. The one who was put on trial is now proclaiming His gospel and shaming those who would reject Him. It’s this wonderful reversal that we see so often in God’s kingdom, something that doesn’t make sense to our worldly minds and demands that we open our eyes to the truth of how God works. The argument or defense or truth that we proclaim when we are opposed is the truth of Christ crucified and risen forever, into whose death we are baptized as the pledge of our clear consciences before God.

And as the ultimate proof that our defense is sure, Peter reminds us that now that Jesus is raised from the dead, death truly cannot touch Him because He has been truly exalted, taken to be at His Father’s side, in a place of authority over all angels, authorities, and powers. As if the resurrection of Jesus wasn’t enough proof that He is the Son of God, all authority in heaven and on earth has now been given to Him. In case you weren’t convinced by His resurrection that you should follow His example, now He gives you the eternal, everlasting, imperishable defense for your life. He sits beside His Father on His heavenly throne and intercedes for us, judging in our favor. And so the one who was put on trial now judges the world.

Peter's message for us today is that our lives are our answer to those who wonder why we have the hope we do. If we claim to be one thing but do not act accordingly, they'll take that as our answer. We may claim Christ, and we may be able to give all sorts of reasons and stories and arguments for why we make that claim, but if we fail to live like Him, our lives will render our words empty. And at the same time, claiming Christ and following His example faithfully serves as the greatest and most undeniable proof of our hope, especially when we stay faithful in times of suffering. If you were confronted right now, and forced to answer for the hope you claim to have, would your life make for a good answer?



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