

“Life After Life”

Reading: 1 Peter 3:8-4:1; 2 Peter 2:4-9

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Everybody loves a good story, and a really good story will often leave you wanting more. There are lots of movies these days that are good enough – or at least profitable enough – that the story doesn’t end, so a couple years later, a sequel will come out to continue the story. Or sometimes the author of a story is long dead, but their stories are so well loved that their fans will continue the story for them, and you get all kinds of people filling in the details and the backstories and the continuations. Everybody loves a good story, and as far as anyone can tell, that’s always been the case. Maybe you’re familiar with the Bible and the many great stories it tells, but something not everyone knows is that “fans” of the Bible have written many stories through the years filling in the details and continuing the tales of the Bible’s characters. There are lots of places where we wish the Bible would give us more details about such-and-such a story; it tantalizes us with its ambiguity sometimes, and so people have at different times felt free to tell more of the story.

One of those very old stories is what’s known as the story of the Watchers. It’s a legend that was told to help explain why God flooded the world in the days of Noah. Genesis 6 doesn’t include all the details we’d like, so people in antiquity filled in some of the holes. In what’s known as 1st book of Enoch, the story goes that not long after God created the world, a group of 200 angels, known as the Watchers, were tempted by the pleasures of creation. They rebelled against God, descended to the earth, and made a pact with one another to stay here and live among humans. While they were here, they taught humans all kinds of dark arts like astrology and weapons-making and sorcery and, interestingly enough, cosmetics. They also were captivated by the beauty of women, and so they begat half-human, half-angelic children with them. These hybrid children became giants and terrorized the earth, and things got so bad that God decided to use a flood to destroy the entire world, save Noah and his family. The fallen angels, then, were rounded up and cast into a huge pit to be imprisoned forever for their crimes.

Very little of that story is in the Bible; like I said, it adds details to fill in the holes in our biblical account of the story of the flood. Nowadays very few Christians would consider the story of the Watchers to be anything more than an ancient legend, but around the time of Jesus and before, the story of these rebellious angels and their giantish offspring was very often taken to be true. In fact, there are quite a few ancient writers, both Christian and Jewish, who mention part or all of this legend of the Watchers. When you wanted to refer back to the standard examples of those who rebelled against God, those who were really bad, those who were the stock villains in the story, you would often refer back to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah and the story of the Watchers. Nowadays we might refer to Sherlock Holmes as an example everyone would recognize of a very smart person, or Hitler as the most evil person imaginable; in those days, the imprisoned angels were one of the examples of rebellion against God.

It's an interesting legend and a good tale to tell around a fire, but it's just a legend and it's not in the Bible, so what does it matter to us? Well, like I said, people living around the time of Jesus all knew the story of those fallen angels, and they were the standard example of rebellion against God. It's a story not many people know today, but once we know it, it helps give us a little insight into this very strange passage in 1 Peter 3:19. It hints at a bigger theological question that the church has struggled with for a very long time: what, if anything, did Jesus experience while He was in the tomb? We in the church recognize that a person is more than just a body, so whether we talk about Jesus' mind or His spirit or His soul, what did He experience while His body was dead? Was He asleep? Was He in heaven, or hell, or a ghost, or something else?

It's a question that the church has never definitively settled. We have it in our creed that Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried, and that He "descended into hell," or sometimes we say that He descended into Hades, the ancient Greek name for the underworld. Some churches even leave that phrase out altogether because it's kind of troubling. Jesus went to hell? The most basic intent of that statement is to affirm that Jesus did in fact really die; He was every bit as dead as every other human who died. He didn't just fake it or appear to die, He was dead, and so the phrase "He descended into hell" is an arguably clumsy way of translating the ancient Hebrew concept of Sheol, the grave, where everyone goes when they die. All orthodox Christians can agree that "He descended into hell" means, at least, that Jesus truly died on the cross in the very same way that you and I will one day die.

Some church traditions have gone into more detail because, again, we want to know what's going on in these great stories that shape us, and so one view is that Jesus was actually tormented in hell between Good Friday and Easter. Another, maybe more common view, is what's known as the "harrowing of hell," that Jesus went and preached the gospel to all those who died before Him and never had the chance to respond to the gospel. The thinking goes that this is how righteous people and heroes of the faith like Moses and David would not have to spend eternity in hell because they'd been unfortunate enough to be born before Jesus. There are surely many other interpretations, and many of them look at this passage in 1 Peter 3:19 for their support, but I think what makes best sense of the context is that Peter is drawing on what would have been this very familiar story of the Watchers when he talks about Jesus making a proclamation to the imprisoned spirits.

So what's the logic that Peter is using in this odd passage? Why, in Peter's mind, does it make sense for Jesus to have preached to these fallen angels? He's actually mixing together several important ideas. The main question Peter is addressing is how Christians in the congregations he's writing to should respond when they are opposed, mocked, slandered, and persecuted. His answer to them is that they should repay evil with blessing. This is one of the central commands of the gospel of Christ; it's also one of the hardest to accept and practice. He points them, of course, to the example of Jesus, who died on the cross when He was faced with persecution. Jesus blessed when He was cursed. Peter's point is that Jesus' death was not a defeat because He remained faithful to God; Jesus' death was in fact victory.

And so, Peter is saying that Jesus' death is the example of all examples of faithful victory, even though it looked like defeat. And because Jesus was faithful, Peter is contrasting Jesus with the example of all examples of rebellion, those fallen angels. Those legendary fallen angels failed in their rebellion and they paid for it with an eternity of shame; these blessed creatures were a curse on humanity, and because the rest of the world followed them in their rebellion, the consequences were a purging flood. Only a few faithful people in Noah's family passed through those waters of death and were saved. The contrast is Jesus, the faithful one who gave His own life to bring us to God, who blessed us in the face of our rebellion against God. Therefore, after His faithful and victorious death, the Spirit of God brought Him to those rebellious angels to preach to them: He was the victorious one, and His victory is demonstrated in His triumphant proclamation to those legendary rebellious villains. And just like Noah passed through the waters of destruction to salvation, we pass through the waters of death in baptism as a sign of our salvation: it is in baptism that we signal our commitment to following Jesus in His faithful death. Baptism is our death before death, in a sense, and it commits us to a certain way of life after we've already lived.

We don't have to accept the legend of the Watchers to get the main point Peter is making: it is faithful perseverance that is the victory in God's kingdom. We win when we bless those who curse us, and no other scorekeeping matters. Jesus is the prime example of this: He was victorious in spite of — or in fact because of — His death. The point Peter was making for his audience in the first century was that they must respond to unfair persecution through mutual submission, trust in God, and love of their enemies. In our age, we face the same basic issue, even though we may not face the same level of persecution: our goal must be to live a baptized life, to live the life that comes after life, after we have symbolically died with Christ and been raised again in the waters of baptism, thereby setting the course for every day that follows.

And yet Peter also makes it clear that this victory of Christ came through the Spirit of God. It is not natural for us to live those kinds of relationships in which we constantly practice love. It's not natural to bless those who curse us. I saw that very clearly the other day when Pastor Carey and I were waiting for a flight home from Newark, and the storms were on their way, and all of the flights around us were getting canceled: I did not hear any travelers blessing the flight crews that day! But when we are baptized, we are showing the world that we have died with Christ and have been raised by the Spirit of God. When we live that kind of life, we are in effect preaching the gospel to the rebellious. That doesn't mean that when we're faithful to God, we get a license to be preachy to people who have hurt us; Christians have already tried that, and it doesn't usually work. But it means that when we live a baptized life, when we love our enemies as Christ loved us, when we walk in the Spirit as Christ did, when we bless those who curse us as Christ blessed us, we are proclaiming the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection.

If you have been baptized, remember your baptism today. If you were baptized as an infant, remember the times when you have seen God's Spirit at work in your life and you have responded in faith. Choose again today to live that life of victory enabled by the Spirit, the life

of faithfulness to God and love for others that became your life when you died with Christ in the waters of baptism and were raised again by the Spirit.



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