1 Peter 3:19-21 has confused many. Not the least of which was Martin Luther, who said: “A wonderful text is this, and a more obscure passage perhaps than any other in the New Testament, so that I do not know for certainty what Peter means.”

The main point is clarified by and culminates in verse 22: “[Jesus] has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.”

So while the precise details may be confusing, the primary declaration of this text is not confusing; it clearly states Jesus, the one who suffered as our all-sufficient Savior is now resurrected and exalted as the all-supreme Lord.

Those who trust in Christ have no need to fear that suffering will have the last word. We are like Noah – we are small minority in a hostile world, but we can be bold in our witness and confident that our future is secure.

What about the reference to baptism? Well, the water of baptism is like the waters of judgment, the flood waters, in Noah’s day – as we are immersed into the water we are reminded that we deserve death for our sins, just like those who died in the flood; and coming up from the water reminds we are kept safe by the ark of Christ and have risen to walk in newness of life.

Peter is reminding us that in our suffering Jesus still rules and reigns; by his death and resurrection Jesus has triumphed over sin, Satan, and death. And we too will be raised to new life in Christ Jesus. And because of that we have reason to hope.

But what about those nagging questions and “confusing” ideas presented in this passage? Essentially, there are four main questions:

1. When did Christ go preach?
2. What did he preach?
3. Who are the spirits in prison?
4. Where is this prison?

In an attempt to answer these questions coherently and cohesively, over the centuries several views have been most commonly held:

**View 1**: When Noah was building the ark, Christ ‘in the spirit’ preached through Noah to the unbelievers who were on earth during the time; they disobeyed and did not repent so now are ‘spirits in prison’ (i.e. persons in hell).

**View 2**: After Christ died, he descended to preach to fallen people in hell¹, proclaiming to them that he had triumphed over them and their condemnation was final.

**View 3**: After Christ died, he descended to preach to fallen evil angels in hell, proclaiming to them that he had triumphed over them and their condemnation was final.

---

¹ For views 2 & 3, some commentators rather than using the word “hell” prefer to use the term “hades,” which is a more general term for “the place of the dead.”
**View 4:** After Christ rose from the dead, he ascended into heaven, to preach to fallen angels, to proclaim to them that he had triumphed over them and their condemnation was final.

Another (Heretical) View: After Christ died, he descended into a place (hell or purgatory depending on who you are talking to) to preach to people and offer a second chance of salvation. Those who hold this view typically extract it to mean that every person who dies gets a second chance at salvation. However, Scripture is emphatically clear that man dies once and after that faces judgment (cf. Lk. 16:19–31; Hb. 9:27).

Of the non-heretical views listed above, none of them are without lingering questions or exegetical issues. For example, while view 1 seems to bring everything together, it does not adequately explain why the Scripture says Jesus “went” for Christ does not really go anywhere if he preaches “in the Spirit” through Noah. Additionally, with the exception of one instance (Hb. 12:23) the plural form of “spirits” (Gk. pneumasin) always refers to angels not humans.

But it would seem strange to talk about God patiently waiting on angels as if they can be redeemed. The patience of God, as it is today, was directed to the sinners of Noah’s generation, those to whom Noah preached righteousness (cf. 2 Peter 2:5; 3:9). So which is it – does “spirits in prison” refer to humans or angels?

While views 2 & 3 have had some historical support, in my opinion, they seem to lack clear exegetical support. First, the word “prison” at no other place in Scripture refers to a place where humans go to be punished after death. Additionally, I would argue that a ‘disembodied descent’ into hell is ruled out by the phrase “he was made alive in the spirit.” Peter is not saying that Christ’s body died but his spirit continued to live in a disembodied state.

Some say that Peter is not necessarily referencing the timing of Christ’s physical resurrection, but to the power behind the resurrection. He’s contrasting “put to death in the flesh” – the physical, visible, transitory realm that belongs only to this present world – with “made alive in the spirit” – the eternal, spiritual realm of the Holy Spirit’s activity. So the they posit the text is saying Christ was “made alive by the power of the Holy Spirit.” If this were the case, then view 1 would clearly be a possibility (as it asserts Christ preached “in the Holy Spirit” or “by the power of the Holy Spirit” through Noah).

Other’s say this text necessarily refers to the timing of Christ’s physical resurrection; and what Peter is talking about is a post-resurrection. They say the participle “went” in verse 19 most naturally refers to the exaltation of Jesus; which, in context, fits well with verse 22 where Jesus is seated at the right hand of God. In fact, the word “went” in verse 19 has the same root of “has gone” in verse 22, which explicitly refers to the ascension of Jesus. This same word is also used in John 14:2, 3, 28; 16:7, 28 and Acts 1:11 to refer to Jesus’ ascension.

So with all that said, and much more could be said, if I had to ‘put my money on one’ it would be view 4. Let me be clear - it’s certainly not without its own remaining questions, and by no means am I saying it’s the only possible view; rather I hold this position humbly and tentatively. Here are the facts that push me this way:
The word “spirits” almost always refers to angels;
The New Testament repeatedly refers to angels in prison/chains (2 Pt. 2:4; Jude 6; Rev. 20:7);
These fallen angels are said to be in heaven (cf. Rev. 12:7; 20:7);
The weight of the passage seems to lean toward a post resurrection event.

So that’s where I land...how about you?

And What About the ‘Random’ Reference to Baptism?
First, let me say this passage does not teach that act of baptism itself saves you. Peter is very clear baptism saves you not as a mere outward physical act – “not as a removal of dirt from the body” the text says – but as an inward spiritual act – “appealing to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” Baptism is our public appeal to God to cleanse our guilty conscience, forgive our sins and give us new life in the resurrected Christ.

Peter is comparing the waters of judgment in Noah’s day with the waters of judgment in baptism. As we are immersed into the water we are reminded that we deserve death for our sins, just like those who died in the flood; and coming up from the water reminds we are kept safe by the ark of Christ and have risen to walk in newness of life.

For those that want more information, let me suggest these resources:

The ESV Study Bible – The notes on this passage are clear, succinct, and helpful.

The Message of 1 Peter by Edmund Clowney – Thorough and helpful, Clowney walks through each question asked above and provides balanced input for each view. He ultimately lands on view 1.

1 Peter by Howard Marshall – Similar to Clowney, Marshall systematically and pastorally walks through the main questions posed. He provides the benefits and drawbacks of each position and seems to land with view 4.

1 Peter by Wayne Grudem – Grudem provides the most expansive treatment on this text that I read. In fact, he devotes an entire appendix to the issues at hand. Whereas Clowney tends to land on view 1 by way of elimination, Grudem almost aggressively argues that view 1 is absolutely correct.

1, 2 Peter, Jude by Thomas Schriener – I think Schriener does the best job of providing a high level summary of this passage, which at the same time digging into the details. Like the other scholars a lot of his final conclusions rest of exegetical work and the precise use of Greek words. He argues that view 4 makes the best sense of these verses.