

“Jesus’s Declaration (Sci-Fi style)”

Eleventh in a series on Peter’s First Letter

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1st Peter 3:17-22; Genesis 6.1-12

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It’s better to suffer, if God so wills it, for good conduct than for bad. For the Messiah suffered for sins also, once for all, the just for the unjust, so that he might bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit. In the spirit, too, he went and made the proclamation to the spirits in prison who had earlier on been disobedient during the days of Noah, when God waited patiently. Noah built the ark, in which a few people, eight in fact, were rescued through water. That functions as a signpost for you, pointing to baptism, which now rescues you – not by washing away fleshly filth, but by the appeal to God of a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. He has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand, with angels, authorities and powers made subject to him.

1st Peter 3:17-22

My translation, using N. T. Wright’s *Kingdom New Testament* and various commentaries.

When the number of people started to increase throughout the fertile land, daughters were born to them. The sons of God saw how beautiful these human women were, so they married the ones they chose. The Lord said, “My breath will not remain in humans forever, because they are flesh. They will live one hundred twenty years.” In those days, giants lived on the earth and also afterward, when sons of God and human daughters had sexual relations and gave birth to children. These were the ancient heroes, famous men.

The Lord saw that humanity had become thoroughly evil on the earth and that every idea their minds thought up was always completely evil. The Lord regretted making human beings on the earth, and he was heartbroken. So the Lord said, “I will wipe off of the land the human race that I’ve created: from human beings to livestock to the crawling things to the birds in the skies, because I regret I ever made them.” But as for Noah, the Lord approved of him.

These are Noah’s descendants. In his generation, Noah was a moral and exemplary man; he walked with God. Noah had three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. In God’s sight, the earth had become corrupt and was filled with violence. God saw that the earth was corrupt, because all creatures behaved corruptly on the earth.

Genesis 6:1-12

Common English Bible, adapted

I can't wait to do baptisms again.

Before someone is baptised, I ask them this (or their parents if they're very young):

*Desiring the freedom of new life in Christ,
will you resist evil
and live in love and justice?*

They answer:

I will, God being my helper.¹

Resist evil. Heavy stuff. Baptisms are delightful. But this world we are born into isn't all happiness and good intentions. Resist evil.

Here's another way of wording the question. It's from the *Book of Common Prayer*, 1600s.

Do you here . . . renounce the devil and all his works, the pomps and vanity of this wicked world, and all the sinful lusts of the flesh, so that you will not follow nor be led by them?²

That's serious. No messing around. Forget a baptismal gown. Better a bulletproof vest and crash helmet.

I will, God help me!³

You'd better hope so!

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We need God's help this morning. As I said, this passage from 1st Peter is tough.⁴

¹ See Celebrate God's Presence: A Book of Services for the United Church of Canada (Toronto, ON: The United Church Publishing House, 2000), 329.

² The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church according to the Use of The Anglican Church of Canada (Toronto, ON: The General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada, 1962), 535. This is revised wording from the 1552 BCP, which read: "DOEST thou forsake the devyl and al his workes, the vayne pompe and glorye of the worlde, with al covetouse desyres of the same, the carnall desyres of the flessch, so that thou wylt not folow, nor be led by them?"

³ The response in the 1962 Book of Common Prayer is a simple "I do," while in the 1552 version the respondent said, "I forsake them all." Perhaps they assumed God's help.

⁴ Martin Luther, not given to easily admit defeat, wrote: "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 a certainty just what Peter means." Quoted in Dennis R. Edwards, 1 Peter, The Story of God Bible Commentary (Grand

"Spirit's in prison," "disobedient" in "Noah's days?" What?

Let's do some time travel.

Start in those mysterious days of Noah. That's the second reading we just heard.

Are these "sons of God" angels? Humans? Kings? Don't know. Whoever, they get together with "human women" and made babies. Giant babies. These babies grow into heroes, mighty and famous. And humanity rots and rages in violence. God weeps with anger, and says "Enough!"

"Sons of God," human wives, and giant babies. Sounds like an X-files episode! Actually, they made an X-files episode.⁵

Whatever sense it once made is long lost. So folks try filling the gaps.

III

First stop on our time travels: Noah. Second stop: a few centuries before Jesus.

Some folks tried making sense of the story. They said that what they wrote was actually by Enoch.⁶ In Genesis, Enoch was Noah's great-grandfather.⁷ Under Enoch's name, they claimed to explain the Noah story.

Those "sons of God," they said, were "Watchers," angels God sent to watch over humanity. But the Watchers rebelled against God, and hooked up with human women. Their offspring were divine-human hybrids. (A Noah movie a few years ago, starring Russell Crowe, imagined these Watchers as giant rock monsters.⁸) They pillaged the earth, and spread the evil that led to the flood.

Now you're almost expecting Gandalf to sweep in and go all Lord-of-the-Rings on

Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2017), 165.

⁵ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All_Souls_\(The_X-Files\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All_Souls_(The_X-Files))

⁶ The parts of 1st Enoch were likely written at different times. The Book of the Watchers likely dates from the 3rd or 4th centuries before Jesus. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Enoch

⁷ Enoch is mentioned in Genesis 5:1-24, in a list of the male line between Adam and Noah. Each person's description concludes with "and he died." The one exception is Enoch's. It says "Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him." In some Jewish and Christian traditions, this was taken to mean that he did not die. Instead, God took him directly to heaven. The mystery of Enoch's ending led to much imaginative speculation.

⁸ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noah_\(2014_film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noah_(2014_film)). This article talks about the Watchers in the movie: www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-topics/hebrew-bible/rock-giants-in-noah.

these Watchers. Well, not quite. According to the Enoch-story, God locked the Watchers inside the earth, and flooded the world clean. While God then gave creation a second chance, the Watchers stayed imprisoned. But the evil did not end.

It feels so sci-fi fantasy. You don't have to be into it. But when Peter wrote his letter, people knew this story.⁹ It looks like Peter used this Enoch-story to encourage them as they follow Jesus.

IV

That's our third stop, around the year 50. Peter is writing to his friends. He is in Rome. They are in the empire's eastern provinces. They are doing good things, and suffering for it.

Of course, they suffer as everyone else suffers; it's part of life. They also suffer for belonging to Jesus. In the empire, you have to be loyal to the emperor. Their loyalty is to Jesus instead. They are made to suffer for it.

Who is making them suffer?

Neighbours, colleagues, their own families. But that was two millennia ago. Every one of them is long gone. Has suffering for doing good things stopped?

So who does it?

Authorities? Sure. But how many governors and magistrates, bureaucracies and chains of command, soldiers and guards "just following orders" have since come and gone. What's changed?

Who does this evil?

Nero was the emperor then. He was bad news. But how many tyrants have come since? How many have suffered their cruelties?

Who is behind this evil?

⁹ *1 Enoch* was not included in the final canons of the Jewish and Christian bibles. However, many of the early Christian theologians regarded *1 Enoch* as scripture, and it influenced Christian thought. Within the New Testament it is quoted in Jude 1:14-15. Enoch the person is mentioned in Hebrews 11:5, perhaps alluding to the book. The book was considered "lost" until the early 1600s, when it was found in Ethiopia, translated into a local language. It is part of the canon of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian Beta Israel Jewish community. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Enoch

Sure, the Roman empire. It's buried in history books. Multitudes of empires and states, nations and regimes, communisms, fascisms, capitalisms, feudalisms, colonialisms, racisms, sexism, phobias and rages have rolled over countless millions since, and still do.

You get the idea. Wherever you stop—Noah's days, the Enoch-story days, Peter's days, our days, any and every day—while the characters and particulars change, suffering for doing right continues. There is something deeper.

V

Suppose you could add up all the corruption and violence on earth . . .

Suppose you could then subtract all we have contributed to this through all time: every bit of human cruelty, depravity, indifference; all crusades, pogroms, persecutions, genocides; each individual act of murder, abuse, and neglect.

What's left? There is still a remainder. Something else.

Call it "evil forces."

Call it "principalities and powers." That's the phrase that Peter's colleague Paul used.

Call it "systemic injustice." That's what we say these days. We see there is more to oppressions and wrongdoings than just the attitudes and actions of individuals.

Call it the "devil" or "slanderer," the "satan" or "adversary." Jesus did.

It seems vicious and wilful. It twists and corrupts goodness. It binds, then converts us to its poisonous work.

"Watchers" is what "Enoch" called it. Or "spirit's in prison."

VI

Next stop. The last stop. Peter tells us that Jesus, after his execution and resurrection,

*went and made the proclamation to the spirits in prison
who had earlier on been disobedient during the days of Noah.*

Yes, all this has a mythical feel to it. Sometimes this sort of language can speak

truth, and help us get at something that is very real.

Picture great forces of evil, beyond anything we humans can conjure up, pre-historical and primordial. Jesus, crucified and risen, goes to the depths where they are. There, to them, he makes an announcement.

They are finished. Done for. Kaput.

He is victorious. They are defeated.

On his cross of death, he entered into their power. It looked like they'd broken him. But instead, raised from death and defeat in the power of God, he broke their power. He broke not only their power over him. Also, their diabolical reign, their treasonous dominion over all things. Its days are numbered. Its time is ending. That age is ending. The reign of God is dawning.

Fallen angels, earthly authorities, powers physical and spiritual, systems of domination, all seen and unseen, are now under Jesus, God's Messiah. The 'sons of God' are subject to God the Son.

VII

Quite the adventure! I don't get it all: what Peter said, the strange stuff in Genesis.

But here's what I know.

Because of Jesus, we persist and persevere, even while those spirits still thrash and lash out in their final throes.

We are baptised. You can be baptised.

And when asked,

*Desiring the freedom of new life in Christ,
will you resist evil
and live in love and justice?*

Or even,

*Do you here . . . renounce the devil and all his works, the pomps and
vanity of this wicked world, and all the sinful lusts of the flesh, so that you
will not follow nor be led by them?*

In the freedom of Christ, you can say:

I will! God is my helper!

Your Lord Jesus, who calls you and claims you, who enwraps you and loves you, bearing the name of God, has taken on the worst enemies. (Including those that try to take hold of you.)

Against Jesus, they've had no chance.

With Jesus, you have every hope. Amen.