



Westminster  
Presbyterian Church  
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

## He Descended Into Hell

### First Peter 3:18-22

This will be the final sermon I will preach on First Peter for a while. Next week is the first Sunday of Lent, and we will turn our attention to the record in the Gospel of Mark that records the trial and death of Jesus.

To close this series I will be using First Peter 3:18-22 as the text. It is an unusual text, and will take some explanation, but for now I ask you to hear the Word.

**“For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.”**

As I mentioned in the first sermon in this series, First Peter is a baptism sermon and this text is certainly about baptism. For it is through water that Noah was saved, and baptism now symbolizes that we too are saved. But I want to look at another aspect of this text. I want to call our attention to the part where it says Jesus preached to the spirits in prison that disobeyed long ago.

As I mentioned, this text is very difficult to interpret, and no one can say for sure what Peter had in mind when he wrote these words. The problem of interpretation here is caused when we have to travel from one language to another, and from one culture to another and from one millennium to another. And believe me, twenty-first century Texas culture is a little different from first century Palestine.

For example, even today you can find plenty of illustrations of the problems we face when we cross language and cultural lines. A writer for the Los Angeles Times printed a sampling of signs he saw during his world travels that attempted to communicate to English speaking tourists. For instance, in a hotel elevator in Paris there was a sign that read, "Please leave your values at the front desk." And I guess along the lines of leaving your values at the front desk, a hotel in Zurich posted the sign, "Because of the impropriety of entertaining guests of the opposite sex in the bedroom, it is suggested that the lobby be used for this purpose." Those cultural and languages differences can get one into trouble.

During the reporter's trip to Russia he read a sign on the door of the Moscow Inn: "If this your first visit to Russia, you are welcome to it." And in the newspaper he saw the following announcement: "There will be a Moscow exhibition of arts by 15,000 Russian painters and sculptors. These were executed over the past two years." And finally, in a Bucharest hotel lobby there is a sign posted next to the elevators: "The lift is being fixed for the next day. During that time we regret that you will be unbearable." I guess with the elevator out, there is a profound truth in this statement.

In a similar way today's text from Peter is one of those that communicates to us the depths of God's love, but uses a picture that makes the interpretation of the text difficult.

The passage from Peter is the source for one of the two phrases in the Apostles' Creed that some recite with trepidation. Most of us have little trouble when we say, "We believe in the holy catholic church," because when

we say “catholic” we mean “universal church,” rather than the Roman Catholic Church. Of course, the Roman Catholic Church is part of this universal church as is the Presbyterian and other churches. And we believe there is one universal, or catholic, church and we are part of it.

The other passage in the Apostles’ Creed that gives us a little trouble is the phrase, “He descended into hell.” Do you remember those old maroon hymnbooks the church used to have in the pews? In the front of that hymnal where the Apostles’ Creed is copied there is an asterisk by this phrase, “He descended into hell,” saying, “Some churches omit this.”

I guess this phrase gives us pause, and the reason some churches omit this phrase is because it simply does not seem polite to say that Jesus went to hell. One reason is that there are some in our community, certainly no one in our church, but there are some people we know who will often tell others where to go. But hell is not a place for God’s people, and certainly it was not a place for Christ to go. But actually, theologically speaking, it is because Jesus went to hell that we will not be going there.

I guess it also has something to do with our scientific world. Hell just does not fit in. It cannot be found with a telescope, or maybe better, it cannot be found with a drilling rig. It is outside the realm of our experience and therefore so very hard for us to understand.

Peter wrote in today’s text, **“Jesus was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, through whom he went and preached to the spirits in prison.”** In the next chapter, chapter 4, verse 6, Peter wrote, **“For this reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead.”**

This passage has been interpreted in many ways, and this morning I will give you my interpretation, as wrong as I may or may not be. Let me stress that this is my interpretation.

First, we must understand that what Peter had in mind in this text was not Hell, but Hades. It is the place that Peter, preaching in the book of Acts,

spoke about where Christ went following his death. In Acts 2:27, quoting the Psalms, Peter wrote, "For thou wilt not abandon my soul in Hades, nor let Thy Holy One see corruption."

There are many verses in the Old Testament that describe death. From these verses it becomes clear that there is a difference between Hell and Hades. Hell is thought of as the place where the wicked are punished. Hades, in Jewish thought, is the place where all the dead went.

The Jews had a concept of a shadow land for the dead –a place of twilight -- a place where God was absent. Look at these verses:

Isaiah 38:18, **"For Sheol cannot thank thee, death cannot praise thee, those who go down to the pit cannot hope for thy faithfulness."**

The Psalms also describe Hades. Psalm 6:5, **"For in death there is no remembrance of thee, in Sheol who can give thee praise?"**

In Psalm 30:9, the writer himself speaks of what death will hold for him, **"What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the pit? Will the dust praise thee? Will it tell of thy faithfulness?"**

Is this not a plea from the Psalmist to have his life extended so that he can continue his praise of Almighty God?

In Ecclesiastes 9:10, notice that the writer is instructing the people to work hard now, for this is their only chance to serve God, **"Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going."**

I understand it was to this place that Jesus went to preach to the spirits in prison. And if Jesus preached in Sheol or Hades, I wonder what sermon he preached?

Well, Peter does not answer this question. But some with too much time on their hands have guessed what was preached to those in Hades, and

what Jesus preached was not salvation, but a pronouncement of their final and irrevocable and awful doom. The problem I have with this interpretation is that it sounds a little too much like rubbing it in. Like my older brother, knowing I did not have the resources to pay after landing on Boardwalk with a hotel and saying, “I won because you lost.”

Did Jesus actually take the time to tell people in Sheol that he won because they lost, and now they were eternally doomed? I don’t think so. Jesus is simply not revealed as one who would rub it in. His preaching was always with grace, and even when he seemed harsh, it was with the purpose and with the hope that the Pharisees would repent.

I believe that Jesus took good and liberating news to those souls in Hades. I believe he told them about his grace and about his atoning death. I know it all sounds a little strange to us, but this passage is a little out of the ordinary.

But if I am right about the text, that is, Jesus went to Hades to preach good news, liberating news, news about salvation, then I am floored when I consider those to whom Jesus preached. His primary audience, according to Peter, was those who disobeyed during the days of Noah. Going with the face value of this text, it appears that Jesus marched right into Hades and picked the worst of the group and told them about his grace. He picked a group that makes us look like saints. He picked a group that would emphasize the point that no one, not me, not you, no one is so bad that they cannot be loved by God and saved through the cross.

I may be completely wrong in my interpretation. No one can say for sure what it means, but one thing is for sure: In telling us Jesus went to preach to those who were disobedient during the days of Noah, he was telling us that we can never say, “God can’t love me after what I have done.”

In Genesis 6, we read about the days of Noah:

**The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. So the LORD said, "I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth—men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air—for I am grieved that I have made them." But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD."**

You may think times are bad today. If you are like me, you are appalled at the moral climate in our country. But notice that during the days of Noah, God was so grieved at his creation that he said, **"I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the earth."**

It was somehow revealed to Peter, and I am confident to prove the depths of God's grace, Jesus went to Hades and preached to the worst people who have ever lived on earth.

I have a lot of questions about this passage. For example, does this mean that people really do have a second chance? That Jesus will even seek us out in hell? I don't know. Does this passage then answer the question of those who have never had a chance to hear about Jesus? That is, those who died without hearing about Christ, are they sought out by Jesus in Hades? Once again, I don't know.

There is so much that I don't know, but what I do know is this: Jesus is gracious and there is nothing I can do, nothing, that will keep him from loving me. I can desert my family, waste all our savings on gambling, harlots, and drunken binges, but still Christ is there urging me to repent, for his grace is far bigger than anything I can do.

Jesus loves us so much that he gave his life, he died on a cross, the just for the unjust, and that, my friends, is the point of this text. Don't be so distracted by the noise which surrounds this text that you don't hear the point.

It reminds me of old Zeke and May. They had been married for over seventy years. Zeke was one hundred and one years old. May was ninety-nine. One hot afternoon they sat on the front porch rocking. Zeke was nearly deaf. But May looked over at him with admiration in her eyes and said, "Zeke, I'm proud of you." He looked around and said, "What did you say?" And May raised her voice and repeated, "I'm proud of you." Zeke looked away and said, "I'm tired of you too, May."

In the confusion of this text, don't miss the message of grace. You who are in Christ, all your sin is forgiven. You who are still holding out wondering how could God love somebody like me, I guess the best answer is God is real good at miracles. He even loves me the hypocrite that I am. It's Amazing, isn't it?

John Newton, a hardened former slave trader, found God's grace to be amazing. There is no count of how many Africans lost their lives on his ships and then how many were sold into slavery. If hell was meant for anybody it was him. Remember the words of his famous hymn, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me."

God's grace is amazing, and it has a purpose. Time did not allow me to say much about Baptism. In this text, Peter wrote that Baptism is an appeal to God for a clear conscience.

William Barclay writes, "There is a very vivid picture here. The word which Peter uses for appeal is *eperotema*; in Greek this was a technical business and legal term. In every business contract there was a definite question and answer which made the contract legal and binding. The question was, "Do you accept the terms of this contract, and bind yourself to them?" And the answer, before witnesses, was, "Yes." Without that question and answer the contract was not valid. Peter was, in effect, saying that in baptism God said to the person coming to Christ: "Do you accept the terms of my service? Do you accept its privileges and promises, and do you undertake

its responsibilities and its demands?” And in the act of being baptized the person answered, “Yes.”

In church this question is given to parents as they present their children for baptism. They are accepting the terms of the contract on behalf of their child. These terms are:

1. In Christ’s death on the cross the payment was made for all our sin.
2. In his descent into hell, Jesus shows the depths of his grace.
3. In his resurrection he offers you eternal life in his presence.
4. And in his ascension into heaven, he sits at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities and powers as proof that he will keep you.
5. Now by faith do you accept the gift of salvation and in so doing do you give yourself to Christ?

If you accept these terms say, “Amen.”