

Augusta First Baptist Church
The Bible Says That? Jesus Goes to Hell
September 9, 2007
The Bible Says That Series

1 Peter 3:18-19

NRS 1 Peter 3:18 For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, 19 in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison.

For these past four weeks, we have considered some of the more bizarre stories and verses in the Bible, that we don't always hear about from the pulpit or the Sunday School classroom. From she-bears mauling smart-aleck children, to Jesus spitting and making mud as part of the miracles, we can agree that the Bible is filled with stories that are strange, perhaps even disturbing.

Today, will be no different, as we conclude the series: "The Bible Says That?"

Have you ever wondered where Jesus went when he died, before he was raised? Perhaps, we cling to that line where Jesus responded to the thief on the cross and said, "Today, you will be with me in paradise." According to 1 Peter, however, Jesus had one more stop to make. This is the only passage in the entire Bible that speaks of where Jesus went between the cross of Good Friday, and the empty Tomb of Easter Sunday. According to Peter, after Jesus died and before he was raised, Jesus went to preach or proclaim to the spirits in prison.

Growing up in my childhood home church, we spoke about Jesus' descent into Hell every Sunday. I remember, reciting alongside my daddy and grandparents, The Apostles' Creed. We do not say The Apostles' Creed in a Baptist church, but not because we have a problem with the Creed itself. We Baptists, have long held that we have no creed except for the Bible. The Apostles Creed was written around the fourth century, as a way for Christians around the world to recite their beliefs in a concise statement. It is as good a summary, of the orthodox beliefs of a Christian, as you will find. In fact, the Baptist World Alliance recited this creed in its 1905 and 2005 international gathering. In churches of all denominations, it is recited around the world every Sunday. For you, that have never recited the Creed, let me encourage you to join me in reciting it together as an appropriate and Biblical affirmation of our faith...

"I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth,
I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the
Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary,
He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; He
descended to hell.
The third day He rose again from the dead. He ascended to heaven and is
seated at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty.
From there He will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.”

Did you notice that line: “...He descended into Hell...” That troubled me as a child. The truth is, it troubles me still. In fact, Peter mentions this again in the next chapter 4:6: *“for this is the reason the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead...they might live in the spirit as God does.”*

These two slivers of passages, both found in 1 Peter, provide the backdrop for the ancient Christian doctrine of the “Harrowing of Hell.” A harrow, for the agriculturally uninformed, is a farming tool that has tines or discs, and is pulled behind a tractor across a plowed field. The purpose is to drag or rake out the dirt clods and rocks. With this idea, Christ harrowing out hell, refers to his descent, to break down the doors of hell itself, “rake” it out.

Here are some traditional ways of understanding this text of Christ’s descent: 1) Jesus, upon his death and before being raised up, descended into a place called Hades, the Greek word that refers, not to Hell as a place of everlasting punishment, but an intermediate state before the final judgment. Please keep in mind, that in this passage neither Hell nor Hades is mentioned, although both are mentioned throughout the New Testament. 2) Those imprisoned could have included the fallen angels, as mentioned in Genesis 6:1-2, or more probably the rebellious generation who perished in the Flood. 3) The Harrowing of Hell, helps us deal with the problem of the eternal destiny of the righteous men and women who were born before the time of Christ, such as Moses, Jeremiah, Ruth, and so on. Some theologians feel that when Christ came tearing down the gates of Hell, it also has implications for those unnumbered dead who have never heard the Gospel of Jesus as Savior. 4) One final interpretation offered by Martin Luther and John Calvin, as well as contemporary theologians today, is that with Jesus descended into Hell, and he fully participated in our humanity, taking on the God-forsakeness of the dead. In other words, he allowed himself the torment of separation and silence from God. Ralph Wood, Professor of Theology at Baylor University, puts it this way: “The day of Christ’s descent into death and hell...is the worst day in history, the Evil Sabbath. It is the day when the play ended, the lights were put out, and all the demonic forces triumphed...Only when we have thus seen what hell really is...can we begin to celebrate the astonishing surprise of Easter.” (Christian Reflection: Heaven and Hell, p. 33)

These four basic observations can be summed up with two interpretations regarding Christ’s descent into Hell. One is of triumph—the “Harrowing of Hell,” where Jesus storms the gates and proclaims the gospel to the rebellious and the righteous. The other interpretation is that of defeat—where Jesus emptied himself completely into the separation from God in death.

What does this mean for us today, indeed, what does this mean for all humanity, everywhere, and of every age, past, present and future? There are two things I would like for us to take away this morning from today’s text. The first is: 1) Christ alone has the power to save. The answer for us today, is that wherever we are, Christ has the power to save. The death of

Jesus was not a random, purposeless, death. The purpose of the death of Christ is that of atonement.

Atonement. Now, there is a word we don't use everyday. It's used quite a bit in the Bible, but, I seriously doubt any of us use it in daily conversation. Can you imagine going to work tomorrow and one of your co-workers says, "Jim, I am afraid I dinged your rear-bumper in the parking lot. But don't worry, State Farm is going to make an atonement." Or, how about one of our children coming up to us and exclaiming, "I forgot to take out the garbage this morning, but I plan on making an atonement tonight by washing the dishes." The word itself has a rather simple definition: A wrong has been made right. Atonement. More specifically, a broken relationship has been re-established. Atonement is where God and the believer become one. Look at the word: at-one-ment. God has taken measures to make sinners at-one with God. Christ was born, lived, died, descended and was raised to make us one with God.

Molly Marshall theorizes, that the atonement is significant because of its relationship to humanity: On our behalf ... for us... it is a way of speaking of solidarity ... the shepherd who lies down with his sheep....Death [becomes] representative...Christ endured the consequences of our sin (taken from lecture notes in 1992). *"For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God."* (1 Peter 3:18a)

This sweeping act of Christ extends even into the pit of hell. In the King James Version of Psalm 139, are the words: 7 *"Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? 8 If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there."* Biblical scholar, G. K. Chesterson, put it this way: "Christ descended into hell—Satan fell into it. One wanted to go up, and went down. The other wanted to go down, and went up. A god can be humble, a devil can only be humbled" (The Ball and the Cross, p. 279).

Christ descent into Hell, means that Christ alone has the power – over death and over Hell - to save. Finally... 2) Nothing stands in the way of Christ's salvation.

When Jesus walked the earth with his band of disciples, he taught them about God's love and he demonstrated God's love, as he cared for the sick and the dispossessed. When he asked his disciples who they thought he was, Peter spoke up – traditionally the same one who authored 1 Peter – and said: *"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God"* (Matthew 16:16), to which Jesus replied, *"Blessed are you... 18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it."* (vv. 17-18).

I don't care who you are, those words are powerful – *"the gates of Hades will not prevail against it."* I believe Jesus meant it.

I wonder if this is what Paul was thinking about when he wrote to the believers in Rome: 35 *"Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ...38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor*

depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:35, 38-39)

Sisters and brothers, if Hell itself cannot stand in the way of God’s generous love, is there anything in your life too big that Christ cannot get through?

How will you respond to God’s great love for you? It is a love so powerful, so profound, so deep, that God would do anything for you, pay any price, go any distance, and even identify with us, into our dying and death.