DID JESUS GO TO HELL?

by Hank Hanegraaff

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“There is no textual basis in the New Testament for claiming that between Good Friday and Easter Christ was preaching to souls imprisoned in hell or Hades. There is textual basis for saying that he would be with the repentant thief in Paradise ‘today’ (Luke 23:43), and one does not get the impression that he means a defective place from which the thief must then be delivered by more preaching.”—John Piper

For many the question of whether Jesus went to hell may seem odd. Yet it is a question in desperate need of an answer. Not only because millions invoke the phrase “He descended into hell” as they recite the Apostles’ Creed, but because millions more have been caught up in the notion that their redemption was secured in an epic battle between Satan and the Savior in the cauldron of hell. In the words of popular prosperity preacher, Joel Osteen:

*The Bible indicates that for three days, Jesus went into the very depths of hell. Right into the enemy’s own territory. And He did battle with Satan face to face. Can you imagine what a showdown that was? It was good vs. evil. Right vs. wrong. Holiness vs. filth. Here the two most powerful forces in the universe have come together to do battle for the first time in history. But thank God. The Bible says Satan was no match for our Champion. This was no contest. Jesus crushed Satan’s head with His foot. He bruised his head. And He once and for all, forever defeated and dethroned and demoralized our enemy.*
While the notion that Jesus descended into hell is not itself heretical, the notion posited by Osteen and others that in hell Jesus engaged Satan in an epic battle to complete the work of atonement most certainly is. Three biblical texts in particular are invoked to buttress the notion that Jesus was in hell between His death and resurrection.

The first is 1 Peter 3:19–20. Here Peter writes that Jesus “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.” Does this mean that Jesus descended into hell? I think not. What Peter communicates here is that just as the Spirit of Jesus preached through Noah to the people of his day—who were then in the flesh, but at the writing of Peter’s epistles were disembodied spirits incarcerated in the prison house of hades—so too in the days preceding the fall of Jerusalem, the Spirit of Jesus was preaching through Peter and the persecuted to a pagan world drowning in a flood of dissipation.

The parallels between the day of Noah and Peter’s day are striking. Like Noah and his family, the faithful were an insignificant minority in the midst of a wicked and perverse generation. Moreover, as Noah built the ark believing that he would see God’s judgment befall the wicked within his own lifetime, so Peter proclaimed that scoffers would witness the destruction of Jerusalem within their very own generation. As the world was deluged and destroyed in the days of Noah, so Jerusalem and its glorious temple were “reserved for fire” in the day of a fledgling first-century church. As Noah “condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith,” and as the persecuted in Peter’s day were “being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood,” so too we are exhorted to look forward in faith to an ultimate “day of the Lord” in which “the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. . . . But in keeping with his promise . . . a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness,” will gloriously emerge out of the ashes of devastation.

In sum, 1 Peter 3:19 has nothing whatsoever to do with Jesus going to hell during the days between His death and resurrection to preach to demonic spirits or to disobedient scoffers who disobeyed while the ark was being built. Instead, the disobedient who died in Noah’s day, in Peter’s day, and who die in our day comprise “the spirits in prison” (souls in hades) who await a final Day of Judgment in which they will be summarily sentenced and sent to an eternal prison designated in Scripture as hell.

Furthermore, as with the words of Peter, so too the words of Paul written in his epistle to Ephesian Christians are frequently taken to communicate that Jesus descended into hell: “What does ‘he ascended’ mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.” The question is, do the
phrases, “he also descended to the lower earthly regions” and “He descended into hell,” have equivalent meanings?

The unequivocal answer is—no! Far from demonstrating that our Lord went to hell, this passage contains an idiomatic expression (an expression unique to the Greek), referring to Christ’s incarnation on earth. In evidence, David uses the same expression (“lower parts” or “depths of the earth”) in exclaiming, “My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body.”11 Surely no one rightly supposes that David was born in the dungeons of hell! Indeed, far from crying out something like, “Satan into thy hellish clutches I submit my being,” as Word of Faith teachers would like to have it, Christ cried from the cross, “Father into your hands I commit my spirit.”12 As such, He did not spend three days between death and resurrection experiencing the horror of hell; rather, absent from the body, He was immediately present with the Father in heaven.

Finally, the words of Jesus—“As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth”13—have been twisted in an attempt to shore up the notion that between death and resurrection, Jesus “descended into hell.”

While the phrase “heart of the earth” has been taken to mean the cauldron of hell, in reality Christ was speaking of His death and burial in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. Jonah’s entombment in the stomach of a fish was the type; Jesus’ entombment in the sepulchre of a friend, the antitype. Moreover, there is not even a hint in Matthew’s gospel, or for that matter in the rest of Scripture, that Jesus experienced three days and three nights in mortal combat with the forces of darkness. Nor is there any warrant for supposing that hades is located in the heart or the core of the earth.

“He Descended into Hell.” I would be remiss at this point if I failed to mention that it is often wrongly argued that the belief that Christ suffered under the demonic hosts in hell is consistent with early apostolic teaching. In doing so, they invoke the phrase “He descended into hell” from the oldest rule of faith—the Apostles’ Creed.14

This, however, is hardly a convincing argument. Prior to its crystallization as a confession, the creed was used in rudimentary permutations as a rite of baptism—but without the phrase in question. The creed began to take on permanency as a rule of faith because of Gnostic heresies that arose in the early Christian church prior to the middle of the second century—but still without the phrase “He descended into hell.”

Even in form of the Old Roman Creed, codified by Bishop Marcellus of Ancyra in the late fourth century, the confession did not contain the phrase “He descended into
hell.” Indeed, not until standardization as the Received Creed long after the fourth century was the clause appended to the confession—and perhaps not officially so until the eighth century. Moreover, we should note that even had the clause been invoked by the early Christian church, the intent would not have been to communicate that Jesus finished the work of redemption in hell.

If church history tells us anything, it is that the early Christians celebrated the broken body and shed blood of Christ on the cross for the complete remission of their sins.¹⁵ —Hank Hanegraaff

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NOTES

3 In light of Christ’s most precious sacrifice, it is almost inconceivable that anyone—particularly someone who takes the sacred name of Jesus upon his lips—would so blatantly reconstruct the centrality of Christ’s atonement upon the cross. Yet in the face of Scripture, which plainly tells us that “by his death” Jesus destroyed him “who holds the power of death—that is the devil” (Heb. 2:14), Osteen has Christ in the cauldron of hell finishing the work of redemption.
4 All Scripture quotations are from the NIV1984.
5 See Gen. 6:5–8.
7 Heb. 11:7.
8 1 Pet. 2:5.
9 2 Pet. 3:10, 13.
10 Eph. 4:9–10.
11 Ps. 139:15–16.
13 Matt. 12:40.
14 The Apostles’ Creed: “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, the Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord: Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into hell. The third day
He arose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the
Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy
Ghost; the holy catholic church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of
the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.”

15 Article adapted with modification from Hank Hanegraaff, AfterLife: What You Need to Know about