

Did Jesus go to hell?

By Dr. Jim Denison

On a recent trip to England, I attended an Evensong service at Christ Church, Oxford. The worship was deeply moving, and the liturgy was beautiful. At one point we recited the Apostles' Creed, which says that Jesus "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried: He descended into hell: the third day he rose again from the dead." Why does the Creed state that Jesus "descended into hell"? Why does the issue matter?

Dealing with a tough text

Our conversation centers in the following sentences from 1 Peter, among the most difficult to interpret in all of Scripture: "It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. 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" (1 Peter 3:17-20).

What does Peter mean by what he says? How does his paragraph apply to us today?

A clear example

Our text begins: "It is better, if it is God's will to suffer for doing good than for doing evil" (v. 17). We're going to suffer for something—why not make it something worthwhile? The receiver in football is going to get hit, so he may as well catch the ball. Jesus was realistic: "In this world you will have tribulation" (John 16:33). The word for "tribulation" means a weight which crushes the grain into flour or meal. This is the way of our fallen world.

Successful people choose their problems. Why not choose to suffer for Jesus, if you're going to suffer anyway? He alone can reward your suffering eternally, and make your faith worth whatever it cost you.

"If it is God's will" is an "optative of the fourth class" in Greek, showing that it is not always the will of God that we follow him at the cost of suffering. But when it is, we are to do so.

Now Peter constructs an example of such faithful sacrifice: "Because indeed Christ died once concerning sins, a righteous man on behalf of unrighteous ones, in order that he might bring you to God" (v. 18a, my literal translation from the Greek). No leader should ask us to go where he or she has not been. Jesus has suffered more for us than we will ever suffer for him. We are each "unrighteous," deserving punishment for our own sins. He was "righteous," his suffering innocent in the extreme.

But his death was not final: "being put to death on one hand in the flesh, brought to life on the other in the Spirit" (v. 18b, my translation). He died in the body, but was raised again by the Spirit of God—the same Spirit who indwells us and will one day raise us to victory in paradise. Paul agreed: "if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you" (Romans 8:11).

Now things get tricky.

Preaching to fallen angels?

Peter continues his exposition of the power of the Spirit, encouraging his readers to endure any suffering in the strength that Spirit gives us. Jesus was raised from the dead by the Holy Spirit, "through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison" (v. 19). "Through whom" points to the Spirit, so that we understand that everything Peter describes was done in and by his power.

"He went and preached to the spirits in prison" reads in English as though the Spirit enabled Jesus to go physically to these "spirits." But "went" does not necessarily imply personal locomotion. Paul reminded the Ephesians that Jesus "came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near" (Ephesians 2:17). Jesus "came" to those in Ephesus, though he never visited the city in his flesh. He "came" through the preaching ministry of Paul and other Christians, his "body."

In the same sense, "the Lord came down to see the city and the tower [of Babel] that the men were building" (Genesis 11:5). The sentence does not mean that God appeared in physical flesh and made a physical journey to a physical place.

Now for the key question: who are these "spirits in prison" to whom Jesus preached in the Spirit? The next verse helps: "...who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built" (1 Peter 3:20a).

Some say these "spirits in prison" are fallen angels. However, 2 Peter 2:4 says that "God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, putting them into gloomy dungeons to be held for judgment." Nowhere does the Bible teach that these fallen angels "disobeyed" during the time of Noah. Most interpreters see this disobedience as occurring before the time of Adam and Eve.

In addition, Jesus says that "in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark" (Matthew 24:38). Most scholars do not believe that fallen angels could have married and been given in marriage (the "sons of God and daughters of men" in Genesis 6 will have to wait for another day, but note that they were active before Noah was called by God).

Nonetheless, one interpretation is that Jesus preached to angels whose fall was related somehow to the time of Noah. Since their "prison" is identified as hell (2 Pt. 2:4), he must have gone to hell to preach to them. We know that he returned to heaven after his

resurrection, so he must have "descended into hell" between his death and resurrection. Or so this line of reasoning goes.

Preaching to those who died in the flood?

A second theory is that these "spirits in prison" are the souls of those who refused God's word and grace and died in the flood. Since they are now in hell, Jesus must have gone there to preach to them. Again, this activity would most likely have occurred between his death and resurrection, according to this view.

However, nothing in Scripture suggests that anyone gets a second chance after death to hear the gospel. Hebrews 9:27-28 says, "Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him." We are to judge the unclear in the light of the clear. This text clearly says that we die and then face judgment, with no hint of a second chance for anyone.

Perhaps he "preached" not God's grace but his judgment, showing these spirits why they are imprisoned. But why would Jesus do this? Why only with this generation? To what purpose? Scripture nowhere teaches that our Savior engages in such punitive action. And as we will see, there are significant biblical problems with the view that Jesus descended to hell after his death.

Preaching in the time of Noah?

Note that Peter's text nowhere states that Jesus "preached to the spirits in prison" between his death and resurrection. As we have seen, this belief is the result of reasoning that he preached to fallen angels or souls in hell, something he would more likely have done between his death and resurrection than after he rose from the dead.

So, a third option is that the Spirit enabled Jesus to preach personally to those who disobeyed during the days of Noah. A "Christophany" is an appearance of Jesus before his incarnation--this would be one such occurrence. However, no other text suggests this event. And we would wonder why Jesus would appear personally to preach to this particular generation and no other.

Preaching through Noah?

In my opinion, the most likely interpretation of Peter's text is that Jesus preached through the ministry of Noah while the latter was building his ark. The "spirits in prison" clearly disobeyed during Noah's day. We know that Noah was a "preacher of righteousness" (2 Peter 2:5). In studying the genealogies of Genesis we also know that he spent more than 100 years building the ark. He was apparently preaching to his generation all during this time, trying to lead them to God's word and grace.

In this view, the same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead enabled him to inspire and motivate Noah's preaching ministry. Peter earlier stated, "the prophets who spoke of the grace that was to come to you searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which *the Spirit of Christ in them* was pointing when

he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow" (1 Pt. 1:10-11, my emphasis). As the "Spirit of Christ" helped the Old Testament prophets, so he helped Noah.

This position helps us reconcile Peter's statement with Jesus' promise to the thief on the cross: "Today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). Clearly Jesus could not be both in hell and in paradise after his death. If he descended to hell after he died, he must have brought the thief to paradise first. Such an interpretation is possible but implausible.

In addition, just before his death, "Jesus called out with a loud voice, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit'" (Luke 23:46). His Father could then have sent him to hell, of course, but the natural reading of the text seems to indicate that Jesus is going "into" God's "hands."

Gleason Archer summarizes: "Christ through the Holy Spirit warned Noah's contemporaries by the mouth of Noah himself." Larry Richards agrees: "Peter is saying that Christ preached to the earth's inhabitants by the Holy Spirit, who gave them God's message through Noah. Their spirits are now in prison awaiting judgment. Jesus spoke to them before they died, not after." Augustine believed that Christ was in Noah when he preached. So do I.

Learning important lessons

You have just been through a brief summary of one of the toughest issues New Testament scholars face. Unless you're working on a paper for a seminary class in biblical interpretation, you may be wondering why it all matters. Consider these life lessons before we close this conversation.

One: serving Jesus is worth its cost and more. We can expect to "suffer for doing good" in this fallen world. No good deed goes unpunished. But Jesus knows everything we do for him, and stands ready to reward our temporal suffering with his eternal blessing. To those who "die in the Lord" there is this promise: "they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them" (Revelation 14:13). You may pay a price to refuse temptation or fulfill God's call on your life. Know that he knows, and that your investment is eternal.

Two: the same Spirit who raised Jesus will empower you. Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16). The same power which defeated Satan's temptations and Rome's grave will give you victory over every enemy of God. All of God there is, is in this moment. And in your life.

Three: we have only today to be right with God. Those who ate and drank in the days of Noah had no fear of a flood, for it had apparently never rained. Just as atom bombs had never dropped on cities before Hiroshima, and planes had never flown into skyscrapers before 9-11. "Tomorrow" is promised to none of us. We are one day closer to eternity than we have ever been before.

Conclusion

Now the Spirit of Jesus is preaching to you and me through his word. As J. I. Packer says, the Bible is "God preaching." Will his sermon fall on deaf ears and hard hearts? Or will we respond to what we hear this morning?

How long has it been since you spent some time listening to God's Spirit? Since you asked him to show you anything wrong between you and the Father, and then confessed what came to your mind, specifically and honestly? Since you drew close to your Lord in personal worship, and listened to his word with your obedient heart? Since you gave him complete control of your mind and life and plans? If it wasn't this morning, will it be?

During a trip to England, I was privileged to spend some unforgettable moments in John Wesley's prayer room. The founder of the Methodist movement would spend an hour in this room each morning, beginning at 4:00 A.M. On his knees, his Bible open before him, he would give his soul to God again. I sensed the holiness of the Father's presence in this closet-sized room, more than two centuries later.

Beside Wesley's prayer bench there stands his personal credo. I made it mine that day, and invite you to make it yours today:

*I am no longer my own but yours.
Put me to what you will,
rank me with whom you will;
put me to doing, put me to suffering;
let me be employed for you or laid aside for you,
exalted for you or brought low for you;
let me be full, let me be empty,
let me have all things, let me have nothing;
I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things
to your pleasure and disposal.*

*And now, glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
you are mine and I am yours.
So be it.
And the covenant now made on earth,
let it be ratified in heaven.
Amen.*

And amen.