



## CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: LESSON 130

By far the key text used by those who teach that Jesus descended into hell, not to finish the work of salvation, but on a preaching mission, is 1 Peter 3:18-20, where Peter writes, “For Christ ... being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which He went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison.” Who were these spirits in prison? There have been a variety of answers to this, such as unbelievers, the saints of the Old Testament, and even demons. Some in the early church taught that Jesus went to hades, in order to proclaim the gospel to unbelievers, so by believing they would be released. Such views are rejected by Protestant churches, as the notion of a second chance or further opportunities of salvation after death is foreign to the Scriptures (Luke 16:22-24, 26; Galatians 6:7-8; Hebrews 9:27).

Others, such as the Roman Catholic Church, teach that Christ’s spirit went to the abode of the dead, to proclaim the gospel, and release and deliver to heaven the souls not of the unjust, but of the just, that is, the saints of the Old Testament, who awaited their Savior in Abraham’s bosom. A similar notion is affirmed in the Eastern Orthodox Church, where Christ through His death and resurrection broke open the gates of hell and liberated these saints, taking them to heaven.

Even within Protestantism, many dispensationalists hold to this view, separating Old Covenant believers from New Covenant believers, teaching that after their death the souls of the former went to hades, that is, Abraham’s bosom, which were later delivered into heaven by Christ; whereas the souls of those who die after Christ directly enter heaven. But as explained in the study of covenant theology, such views of two separate bodies of believers are unbiblical. The Bible teaches the unity of God’s people; and all who believed in God and His promises were counted righteous, requiring nothing further for salvation (Romans 4:1-8); and upon their death the souls of all believers enter God’s blessed presence in heaven.

Others teach that the “spirits in prison” were fallen angels of Noah’s day, who because of their sexual sin, were bound by God. It is to these which Christ went and proclaimed His triumphant victory. Such a view seems complicated and imaginary, not fitting in with the ordinary sense and context of the chapter.

Let’s look at 1 Peter 3:18-20. Though majority of people think this mission of Jesus took place after His death, the passage does not state that. All Peter is saying is that in or by the Holy Spirit, which raised Him from the dead, Jesus went and proclaimed a message to those which did not obey during the days of Noah. Nothing is said about all of the Old Testament saints, unbelievers, or demons. These are people who were alive at the time of Noah, to whom Jesus proclaimed His message, by the power of the Holy Spirit, and through Noah (1 Peter 1:11; 2 Peter 2:5). They did not obey the message and died in unbelief, and so Peter calls them the spirits which are now in hell, the same place the rich man in Luke 16 ended up at. This description seems to fit the simple reading of the passage and its immediate context.

Other main passages used to teach that Christ descended to hell are Romans 10:6-7; Ephesians 4:8-10; 1 Peter 4:6. In conclusion, there is no biblical support for the idea of Christ descending to hell after His death, on some preaching mission to non-believers, providing them an opportunity for salvation; or to saints, delivering them to heaven; or even to fallen angels, proclaiming victory over them. These are the outcome of reading such views into the passages rather than reading out of them what they are teaching.

With regard to the Apostles’ Creed and the phrase “He descended into hell,” given the lack of biblical support, some have rejected the idea and have called for the removal of the phrase, and with it the source of much confusion. Others, who are in favor of keeping the phrase, and though they communicate biblically accurate doctrines as to what happened to Christ, even though some would argue that these do not fit the order of or add significant meaning to the Creed, they nonetheless fully reject any heretical notion of Christ having to go to hell in order to suffer further and complete the work of redemption.