

Sermon for April 8, 2018 – Easter 2

Colossians 2:13-15 (EHV)

Theme: Christ's Descent into Hell:

- 1) What do the Scriptures teach about it?
- 2) What is its meaning for us?

¹³ Even when you were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ by forgiving us all our trespasses. ¹⁴ God erased the record of our debt brought against us by his legal demands. This record stood against us, but he took it away by nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵ After disarming the rulers and authorities, he made a public display of them by triumphing over them in Christ.

Tomorrow, April 9th, will be the 15th anniversary of an iconic event. Can you guess what it is? It was on that day, in 2003, that US marines entered Firdos Square in the heart of Bagdad, Iraq and, with the aid of an M88 Armored recovery vehicle, pulled down a rather large statue of Saddam Hussein. That event was important for two reasons: first, it was a clear sign to all who continued to fight for Saddam Hussein that they had lost the war. Secondly, it was a source of joy and relief to all in America: our enemy had been defeated. Our troops can come home.

Sadly, new enemies arose after Saddam's defeat – keeping our troops over there and in harm's way, even though the war had been won. Still, that doesn't change the fact that Saddam Hussein – an extremely dangerous man – was defeated.

Now, some of you might be wondering why I am bringing up the toppling of Saddam's statue in a sermon meant to discuss Christ's descent into hell. It's because Jesus' descent into hell served a similar purpose to the toppling of Saddam's statue in the heart of Bagdad: it proclaimed the utter defeat of our enemy! Let us learn this truth, under the theme: **Christ's Descent into Hell:** 1) What do the Scriptures teach about it? 2) What is its meaning for us?

Part One: Christ's Descent into Hell: What do the Scriptures teach about it?

In the apostle's Creed we confess that - after Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried - he descended into hell. But why? Did he go there to suffer for our sins? That is what I used to think as a child, before taking confirmation instructions with my Dad. But he pointed out that this was not the case. Jesus' cry from the cross - "*it is finished*"ⁱ - was a cry of victory and not defeat. All was finished. Every sin was paid for in full. There was no need for Jesus to suffer any longer.

Our sermon text basically says the same thing. The apostle Paul writes: *¹³ Even when you were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ by*

forgiving us all our trespasses. ¹⁴ God erased the record of our debt brought against us by his legal demands. This record stood against us, but he took it away by nailing it to the cross.

In other words, every sin of ours was paid for in full by Christ. There is absolutely no need for either Jesus or any one else to suffer for any sin of any human ever again! Why? Because God erased the record of debt that stood against us. He took it away by nailing with Jesus to the cross.

Well, if Jesus didn't descend into hell to suffer for our sins, why did he go down there? The last verse of our text tells us: ¹⁵ *After disarming the rulers and authorities, he made a public display of them by triumphing over them in Christ.*

In order to understand this verse, we should understand something about Roman culture. Whenever Rome conquered a nation, they would have a public parade in that nation's capital. The conquered leaders were led in procession through the streets – usually towards an execution at the end. Why? To both encourage the Romans troops who heard about it and dissuade any would-be enemy from trying to revolt. To fight Rome was useless. It will only end in defeat.

After Jesus disarmed the “rulers and authorities” through his cross (that is to say, after he took away the only power the devil and his allies had over us), he went to hell to show their utter defeat.

Jesus descended into hell, therefore, as a victor proclaiming his victory. By being there he tore down any hope Satan and his allies had of ever winning! Jesus made a public display of Satan's weakness, thereby proclaiming how foolish it is to cast your lot in with him, instead of Christ.

Now that we understand the reason behind Jesus' descent into hell, let us talk about some specifics details: what does the Bible teach us about it?

Truth be told, the Bible doesn't tell us a lot about Jesus' descent into hell. The only passage that gives us any details is 1 Peter 1:18-19, which reads: *He [Christ] was put to death in flesh but was made alive in spirit, in which he also went and made an announcement to the spirits in prison.*

In order to understand this passage correctly, the first thing I have to explain is Peter's interplay between “flesh” and “spirit”. I know, at first glance it might seem as if he were saying that, as Jesus' body lay in the grave, Jesus' spirit descended into hell, but this is, in fact, NOT what Peter is saying. When Peter uses the term “flesh” in reference to Jesus, he is speaking about a state of weakness, sorrow and humiliation. When Peter uses the term “spirit” in reference to Jesus, he is speaking about a state without any weakness, sorrow or sin, but pure glory.

While Jesus walk this earth, his body was like our bodies – subject to sorrow, weakness and decay because of sin's curse. With that weak body, Jesus died “in flesh.” But when Jesus was made alive, his body changed. Sin's curse was gone, as well as all sorrow, weakness and decay. Jesus rose in “spirit - that is to say, with a glorious body that was no longer subject to all the limitation of our sin cursed bodies, due to Adam's fall.

And because Jesus was made alive with such a body for a perfect state of existence, believers can be confident that they too will one day rise from the dead with the same body for the same kind of

perfect, glorified existence that Christ rose, as the Apostle Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians: *That is the way the resurrection of the dead will be. What is sown is perishable; it is raised imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown as a natural body; it is raised as a spiritual body.* ⁱⁱ

So then, after Jesus was made alive in spirit – that is to say, after his body and soul reunited in glory – never to be separated again – Jesus (fully alive and glorified) went down to make an announcement to all the souls in hell, who (due to their unbelief) lived on this earth as enemies of God. What did he tell them? That he won. He made a public spectacle of the devil in front of them. By being in hell and showing his victory over Satan, Jesus also confirmed that their condemnation was just and right for not believing all preachers of righteousness, who (like Noah) constantly called them to repentance and faith during their time of grace on this earth. Their condemnation was in no way God’s fault, but entirely their own. How so? Because they refused to repent of their sins and believe in the one God promised to send to save them from their condemnation.

And after Jesus proclaimed his victory over Satan in hell itself, what did he do next? The one thing no one has ever done before: he left. Jesus left hell. Just think about what that means: Jesus so totally triumphed over sin, death and the power of the devil, that not even hell itself could contain him! Jesus left hell and appeared to his disciples – risen from the dead and fully alive – so as to encourage them with his victory!

Part Two: Christ’s Descent into Hell: What is its meaning for us?

Now that we have considered what the Bible tells us about Jesus’ descent into hell, let us consider why it’s important for us to confess it. What meaning does Jesus’ descent into hell have for us?

In a word? Encouragement. Because Jesus descended to hell to proclaim Satan’s utter defeat, we no longer have to be afraid of the devil. His accusations cannot condemn us because we are covered in the righteousness Christ won for us.

Because Jesus’ descent into hell reassures us of Satan’s utter defeat, we find in Christ our refuge from all the evil that surrounds us. We don’t have to be afraid of the pressure and persecution we might face for Christ’s sake. No matter how much the devil and his allies rage, they can harm us none. They’re judged, the deed is done. One little word can fell them.

Yes, as we remain in Jesus – confessing him as the Christ and looking to him alone for forgiveness, life and salvation –we can rest assured in Jesus’ promise that that gates of hell will not overpower us.

Do you now see the wonderful comfort we can derive from a correct understanding of Jesus’ descent into hell? He didn’t go there to suffer, but to proclaim his victory. He didn’t go there with his spirit alone, but (after being made alive in spirit) he went down to hell with his glorified body and soul united – showing the absolute defeat of sin, death and the devil. And Jesus didn’t just go to hell to remain there. No, he went to hell to come back again: revealing its utter defeat.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: tomorrow marks the 15th anniversary of the fall of Bagdad together with the tearing down of Saddam's statue in Firdos square. Do you remember how you felt on that day, as you saw the statue come down? I was filled with relief, joy, and hope. Even though that hope was short lived (because other enemies in Iraq rose to take Saddam's place against us) I want you to think about that joy, hope and relief you felt 15 years ago today and apply those feelings to what Christ accomplished when he descended into hell to proclaim his victory over sin, death and the power of the devil. Continually think about what this means for you because, unlike what happened in Iraq, the victory Jesus won is final. Yes, the world, devil and all his minions might continue to rage against us, but the victory Christ won is final. Nothing can ever change it. May this truth lead you to be bold in your life for Christ – unafraid to confess him by means of your words and actions – thereby snatching souls from the gates of hell by leading them to Jesus for salvation. Amen.

ⁱ Cf. John 19:30

ⁱⁱ 1 Corinthians 15:42- 44a EHV - Consider also John 3:6 – a passage showing that the interplay between “flesh and spirit” is more about sinful vs glorified states of existence than having a physical body or not having a physical body.