

# Into Hell with Jesus

sermon digest

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1 Peter 3:17-4:6

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Rome was hell on earth for followers of Jesus. In 50 CE, some twenty years after the crucifixion of Jesus, Emperor Claudius expelled Jews from Rome because of a disturbance caused by one "Chrestus," probably Christ, the first indication that Christians had been noticed by Rome. In 64 CE when fire destroyed one-fourth of the City of Rome, Nero needed a scapegoat. He ordered the arrest and execution of Roman Christians for arson. Tacitus described the executions: "Covered with skins of beasts they were torn by dogs and perished or were nailed to crosses or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as nightly illumination" (*The Catacombs and the Colosseum*, 259). Both Peter and Paul may have died in this holocaust.

Probably written toward the end of the first century, the first epistle bearing the name of Peter counseled Christians: "It is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil." Suffering Christians were in good company; "For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God." Almost as a parenthesis to the communion of suffering experienced in the church, First Peter envisioned the Christ, "put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit" preaching to the spirits in the prison of death (3:18). Then, the writer comes back to the idea of evangelizing the dead (4:6): "For this is the reason the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead, so that . . . they might live in the spirit as God does."

***The suffering of innocence is hell to understand.*** Hell was one of the four-letter words that was not allowed in my childhood conversation either to be uttered as a curse on someone ("go to hell!") or to be spoken in levity as if there were no hell. As a child, I found it to be a bit confusing to put hell on the same level of reverence that I was taught to hold for God, but I also was confused by folks who put the fear of hell above the love of God.

Perhaps you have said, "that hurts like hell!" The statement is usually an exaggeration of a pain that can be managed with a couple of aspirins. At some point in life, however, most of us are stunned by the kind of pain that people have to endure. To stand by the bedside of a loved one who is suffering from an incurable illness is beyond the physical pain that we can reach with our multitude of modern anesthetics. How do you find relief from the deep spiritual agony of helplessness in the face of the loss of someone you love? Joe and Ruth Hays were church friends, examples of the kind of people you wanted your children to know. After Ruth's long battle with cancer and finally the welcomed day of death as a relief from the agony of life, Joe said, "it's like having a deep pain that you want to rub but can't reach."

The Apostles Creed, recited by some churches in every worship service, contains a controversial passage that has been expunged by many churches. The Creed refers to Jesus, who "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell." The passage "descended into hell" has been dropped. Modern Christians could not bear the thought of Jesus entering the realm of the dead along with the worst of the worst people who lived on earth. Reference to the descent of Jesus into hell was probably a reflection on the passage in First Peter, which, at best, is a vague reference to the suffering and death of Christ.

The strange part of the visitation of Jesus to the dead is that it is not about the righteous or the innocent. The writer refers to the "spirits in prison" as the disobedient people from the day of Noah who refused to listen at the cost of their lives. Most interpreters prefer to avoid speculation about a passage that is so ambiguous and one that causes so much discomfort. The word *hell* does not appear, but the implication is there. The love of God in Christ exemplified in the command to love our enemies is carried out in the visitation of the Christ to the disobedient spirits in prison.

One of the more profound books that I have read in recent years is *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (2001). What happened to Jesus between Good Friday and Easter morning? Alan Lewis was a Presbyterian seminary professor dying with cancer when he wrote the account of the Christian struggle with death and dying. He noted the tendency to skip Holy Saturday of Holy Week. We want to leap from the cross to the empty tomb without pausing to ask about the day of death. Lewis warns, "we have not really listened to the gospel story of the cross and grave until we have construed this cold, dark Sabbath. . . In the death cry of Jesus of Nazareth there resonates the ageless universal protest of human suffering, affronted by the crookedness of human life, whereby the innocent are tortured and the diabolic flourish (p. 56)." In his struggle with the end of life, Lewis found himself needing to peer into the tomb of Jesus. Unlike the women on Easter morning, Lewis dares to go on Saturday, the day of death. It is not as if he were the first. He found the same morbid desire to face up to death in the struggle of Job and

throughout the years of Christian history as Christians faced suffering, torture, and death sometimes at the hands of the very Church that claimed to know the gospel of Christ.

Dare to look into the tomb on Saturday and you will find that the triumphant Christ proclaimed by Easter Christians has not yet arrived. Early Christians were repelled by the crucifixion of Jesus, but they remembered anyway. They could not understand the divine reason in the suffering of Jesus. That is probably why it became so important. They could not imagine any moment in the life and experience of the Christ that was not redemptive love in action. Somehow early Christians managed to hold onto the words from the cross. The only word of the dying Christ that is repeated in two Gospels, Matthew and Mark, is the cry of dereliction, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Whatever else hell may be, it is this: the sense of being abandoned by God. Who among us have managed to live through the dark days of despair without finding a strange fellowship with the dying Christ? The cry haunts us because of its familiarity.

Salvador "Buddy" Martinez was one of my classmates in graduate school. Buddy came from the Philippines to the US to study theology. He became a Christian through the influence of Christian missionaries, but most of his family was Buddhist. I recall the shocking witness he gave to his childhood religious experience. Before he knew Christ, he met God in his spiritual quest. In his adult life committed to Christian ministry, he continued to believe that his Buddhist family was in the hands of a loving God. He latched onto the passage in First Peter where Christ reaches out to the spirits in prison. Buddy introduced me to the universal love of God in Christ that reaches into the depths of hell.

**No place and no condition in human life is outside the reach of the God of grace.** Is there a place for hell in speaking Christian? Long before the time of Christ, the Psalmist wondered, "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?" He reached the high water mark in faith when he declared, "if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there." Perhaps the passage is one of those off-the-wall comments that we ought to ignore; but I find it strange that long before the time of Christ, the Psalmist came to the conclusion that God reaches into the depths of the grave, the realm of the spirits in the prison of death.

People who value the Bible desperately need to take a second look at the biblical teachings about hell. Most of our mental images are fixed in place by Dante's 14<sup>th</sup> century epic poem *The Divine Comedy* and his description of the "Inferno." In his study of the sentences of the Apostles Creed (*From the Apostles' Faith to the Apostles' Creed*, p.137), Sydney Barr concluded that the word *hell* is woefully misleading. Over the centuries hell acquired lurid connotations that are thoroughly un-Christian, although they can be found in the New Testament. Barr notes that we need to remember that the biblical concept is rooted in the shadowy underworld region which is the abode of the dead. In Hebrew *sheol* is the grave in which the dead are buried and which conjures up all kinds of speculation about a twilight existence much as we get in the horror movies about zombies today. The Greeks had a similar word *hades* which was the first stop of the eternal soul on the way to a final destiny. Heaven and hell were places that one could locate on a map. God lived up in the heavens. Evil lurked in the underworld of the abyss, where we bury our dead. Primitive logic began to locate the grave with hell as a place of torment. The image of *Gehinnom*, a place where human sacrifice had taken place, a garbage dump outside the city walls of Jerusalem where the carcasses of dead animals were thrown, where fires burned constantly, and "the worm dieth not," came to be seen as the figure for divine punishment for evil.

Jews and Christians in biblical times were not immune from the same kind of vengeful anger that afflicts most of us. The drive to get even with people who heap havoc on the lives of others was moved from "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" to entrusting our anger to the justice of God. The few references to hell in the New Testament most of which are found in the final Revelation are a call to trust the final justice of God. The images of Dante are hard to reconcile with a God of eternal love. The problem with my childhood image of hell was the contradiction of hell with grace. If the essence of God is forgiving grace, how can God be involved in some scheme of sadistic madness in which bad people, any people, are tormented?

Jean-Paul Sartre, the existentialist atheist French playwright, depicted the afterlife of three damned souls in "No Exit." The three found themselves locked up in a room with the expectation of some horrible punishment to fall on them for their misdeeds. After a long conversational journey in which they accuse each other the three characters make the shocking discovery that "Hell is other people." Sartre does not imply that hell is community so much as he judges that hell is being locked up with people like yourself. I

find it strange that Christians need the wisdom of an atheist to break through the barriers of their despair, but Sartre painted a picture we all need to see. There is a hell on earth which we struggle to understand in the suffering of innocence, but perhaps the worst hell is the one we fashion for ourselves.