

THE GLORIOUS CHURCH

SPECIAL STUDY I—DID CHRIST GO TO HELL?

“Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth?” Ephesians 4:9.

Some people have thought that during the time between Christ's death on the cross and His resurrection, He went down into hell (or Hades) to preach to the people there, and to bring out the saints of Old Testament times who could not previously be taken into God's presence because no atonement price had been paid for their sins.

THE INTERPRETER'S BIBLE says of Ephesians 4:9 that it is certainly a reference — the earliest in Christian literature — to the descent of Christ into Hades.

The Apostles' (?) Creed says, “He (Christ) descended into hell.” This doctrine is elaborately set forth in the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, an apocryphal gospel, which, according to the general consensus of scholars, was composed in the fifth century.

Those who accept this doctrine maintain that such references as I Peter 3:19; 4:6, Ephesians 4:9; and Matthew 27:52-53 support it.

However, there is much disagreement as to WHAT Christ may have done in hell (or really, *Hades*, the unseen world of all the dead). According to the *Gospel of Nicodemus* (a highly imaginary legend), Christ, between the time He died and rose again, went down to Hades to rescue Adam, Noah, Moses, Isaiah, and all the other Old Testament saints. They were being kept away from God's presence until the time when Christ should die and make complete atonement for the sins of all mankind of all ages.

Such teaching as this contradicts Romans 3:25, which says that God *passed over . . . the sins done aforesaid* during the time of His forbearance. Apparently the Old Testament saints were ushered into heaven when they died, even as we are. Elijah was taken into heaven (II Kings 2:1, 11), and apparently Enoch was also (Hebrews 11:5). We read that Abraham was accounted righteous by faith (Romans 4:3). If God accounted him righteous, why should he have been shut off from God in a prison? It is true that full payment had not yet been made for the sins of these people until Christ died. But Christ is the *Lamb of God, slain from the foundation of the world* (Revelation 13:8; 5:6). Therefore, in anticipation of that sacrifice, God *passed over* the sins of the Old Testament saints.

THE GLORIOUS CHURCH

I Peter 3:19 tells of Christ preaching to those who were in prison. Therefore, some have understood that Christ preached to the *sinner*s in *Hades*, such as those who had been disobedient in the days of Noah.

There are many unanswerable questions and objections to the idea that Christ preached to the sinners in Hades.

- (1) Why did He preach JUST to the sinners who were disobedient in the days of Noah, as the text indicates? Other ages had many disobedient, lost people who would have needed Christ.
- (2) WHAT could Christ have preached to them? Between His death and resurrection, Christ could not have preached the gospel. For the gospel consists of His death, burial, *AND RESURRECTION* (I Corinthians 15:1-4). We know that Christ was *raised* for our justification (Romans 4:25). Therefore, during the period between His death and resurrection, Christ could not have offered them justification. Did He, then, go to hell to taunt those who were lost?
- (3) WHAT PURPOSE would Christ have had for going to Hades? It is certain that the wicked were offered no second chance (II Peter 2:5, 9). And the righteous with their sins *passed over* did not need to be rescued.
- (4) WHAT RESULTS could Christ have expected from such a preaching expedition? No one doubts that one could hold a *hot* revival meeting in hell! Note how concerned the rich man in Hades was about his soul and the souls of his brothers (Luke 16:24-28). But note also that Abraham said it was impossible for the rich man to change his state. Christ did not raise the wicked dead from the graves, and He could not have preached justification to them until He arose Himself.

To test any interpretation of a difficult Bible passage, such as I Peter 3:19, three questions may be asked:

- (1) Exactly what does the text say? Are we reading ideas into it that are not actually stated in the text?
- (2) Does the interpretation contradict other more plain passages of Scripture? Does it harmonize with other Scriptures?
- (3) Does the interpretation fit into the context of the passage, so as to make one harmonious teaching with what goes before and what follows?

THE GLORIOUS CHURCH

Let us consider the doctrine that Christ went to preach in hell in the light of the three questions given above:

- (1) The text says that Christ was put to death in His flesh; but that He was *quicken*ed, or made alive, in (His) spirit. The word *spirit* should not be capitalized here, as it is in the King James Version. The Greek text simply says, *in spirit*, rather than *in THE (Holy) Spirit*. Now we know that Christ's spirit never actually died, but went into Paradise (Luke 23:46). The spirit of Christ was quickened in the sense that it received an increased vigor and power after His sufferings in the flesh. Read I Peter 3:22 to see how His spirit was *quicken*ed.

In speaking of the spirit of Christ, which was *quicken*ed, Peter says that Christ also went in spirit and preached unto the spirits *in prison*. Just WHEN He preached is not clearly indicated here. From this verse alone one could not determine whether the spirits were in prison when Christ preached to them, or were in prison when Peter wrote this letter, which was many years later.

- (2) The doctrine that Christ preached to sinners in Hades contradicts Peter's own writings. II Peter 2:4-5, 9: "For if God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to Hell (*Tartarus*), and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved *unto judgment*, and spared not the old world, but saved Noah the eighth person (with seven others) - - - the Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations, and to *reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment* to be punished." These verses positively rule out the doctrine that Christ offered these sinners of ancient times a second chance (and we can conceive of no other reason why Christ should have preached to them).

Furthermore, the doctrine contradicts Christ's statement in Luke 23:43 that He would be in Paradise after His death. Certainly the sinners who had been disobedient in the days of Noah were not in Paradise where Christ went.

- (3) The thought of the whole passage, I Peter 3:17-4:2, is that it is better to suffer, if need be, in well-doing than to compromise with evil. (Note especially 3:17 and 4:1.) To prove this point, the sufferings of Christ are set forth

THE GLORIOUS CHURCH

as an illustration. (See 3:18.) The glory that came to Him after His sufferings (see 3:22) shows us that we will also do well to endure sufferings patiently.

Question — Does the supposed preaching expedition into Hades show that Christ's sufferings were rewarded? And does it thus set forth His sufferings as an encouragement to us in suffering? The answer is *no* to both of these questions. Since we know nothing whatever about what this supposed preaching expedition accomplished, why should it encourage us to bear sufferings? There is no hope or encouragement for us in thinking that Christ's sufferings were followed by a preaching expedition into Hades, when we do not know the results of that preaching. This doctrine does not fit into the context of the passage, as required by question (3) above.

THE TRUE INTERPRETATION OF I PETER 3:19

Naturally we are unsatisfied to say, "I don't believe that Christ went to hell." We want to know what we may believe as truth. It seems to us that the true interpretation of I Peter 3:19 may be perceived from what has been written before in this special study, and from these verses:

- (1) I Peter 1:11 — "The prophets - - - prophesied - - - searching what manner of time the *Spirit of Christ, which was in them*, did signify, when it *testified* beforehand the sufferings of Christ."
- (2) II Peter 2:5 — Noah was "a preacher of righteousness."
- (3) Genesis 6:3 — "And the Lord said, My *Spirit* shall not strive with man forever, for that he also is flesh."

God's Spirit, which is the same as the Spirit of Christ, or the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:9), strove with men in the days of Noah. But it was through the prophets (preachers) that the Spirit of Christ testified. Noah was a preacher of righteousness. In the days of Noah, Christ's Spirit preached through Noah to those who were disobedient in those days, and who have therefore ever since been reserved in prison unto judgment. And, of course, they were in prison when Peter wrote his epistle.

Let us test this interpretation in the light of the three questions given before:

- (1) There is nothing in this interpretation out of harmony with the exact words and thoughts of the text (I Peter 3:19).

THE GLORIOUS CHURCH

- (2) This view is in harmony with the Scriptures given above (I Peter 1:11; II Peter 2:5; Genesis 6:3). A parallel thought is in Ephesians 2:17. In that passage Paul told the Ephesians that Christ *came and preached peace to you that were far off*. Of course, Christ came and preached to the Ephesians in the persons of His apostles, just as He went and preached in Noah's day through Noah. In both cases, the Spirit of Christ preached, but the words were uttered through human lips.
- (3) This interpretation fits wonderfully into the context of the passage, which is designed to teach us that we should suffer, if need be, for well doing, because Christ so suffered. Note how well it fits into the argument:

Peter mentioned (3:18) that Christ's Spirit was quickened after His sufferings. Having mentioned Christ's Spirit, he said that ALSO Christ went in that Spirit and preached to the spirits now in prison. Of course, that preaching was done long before He suffered. Note that FEW (only eight) were saved as a result of that preaching.

Since that time Christ has suffered and died to bring us unto God. He wished to bring the men in Noah's day to God, but few obeyed.

Behold now the increased power in the preaching of Christ since His sufferings. Millions of souls have been saved through water (baptism), while only eight were saved through water in the days of Noah before Christ suffered. Those who read Peter's letter could themselves testify that Christ's preaching to them through His apostles was vastly more fruitful than His preaching in old times through Noah before He suffered.

According to I Peter 3:21, we are saved by baptism through the resurrection of Christ. If there had been no suffering, there would have been no resurrection. With no resurrection, there would have been no baptism and no salvation. Christ's sufferings were therefore necessary and very fruitful. We should take courage by the example of His sufferings.

Christ once said (John 12:32), "And I, IF I be lifted up from the earth (that is, crucified), will draw all men unto me." This increased spiritual power of Christ to

THE GLORIOUS CHURCH

draw all mankind since His suffering, is what Peter meant by Christ being *quicken*ed in spirit.

What about the other Scriptures that are set forth as support for the doctrine that Christ went into Hades?

- (1) Ephesians 4:8-9. — See the notes in this book on these verses.
- (2) Matthew 27:52-53 — We know nothing whatsoever about this event, except the bare facts as recorded. It is pure speculation to try to make these verses fit into a theory about Christ going into Hades. The temporary resurrection of these saints is no greater a miracle than the resurrection of Lazarus and similar events. Many things occurred during the earthly sojourn of Christ that proved His deity. This event certainly proved that Christ was the very Son of God. More we cannot say.
- (3) I Peter 4:6 — Who are *the dead* to whom the gospel was preached? They were not the souls of the dead, but those who were once alive, and are now dead. When they were living, the Word of God was preached to them. Now they are dead. Thus the gospel was preached to the dead. This verse should help us to understand I Peter 3:19, which tells of Christ preaching to the spirits *in prison*.

I Peter 4:5, the verse immediately preceding the one we are now considering, speaks of Christ as being ready to judge the quick (or living) and the *dead*. This obviously refers to those who will have died before Christ returns, as contrasted to those who will be living when He comes back.

Our conclusion is that the doctrine that Christ went into Hades is not taught in the Bible, and contradicts the Bible. It is an unprofitable, speculative, controversial, confusing teaching. A man could hold this doctrine and still be a Christian, but the doctrine itself is error.