Last week we studied what it means when we confess that Christ 'descended into hell'. It was unavoidable to read 1 Peter 3:19-21 in this respect and it became obvious that a deeper study of what these passages mean should be conducted.

We attempt today to determine the various opinions that scholars held and what should we believe in this respect.

1 Peter 3:18-20 For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; ¹⁹in which also He went and made proclamation (*kerusso*) to the spirits now in prison, ²⁰who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water.

Just exactly who are these "spirits in prison," and how and when did Jesus Christ "made proclamation" unto them, and what did He preach unto them? Some scholars have declared this the most difficult passage in the Bible to interpret. The great reformer Martin Luther (1483-1546) has perhaps given the best response of all time, however, when he said, "I don't know what Peter means here!" This passage has certainly been the cause of tremendous debate throughout the centuries, and countless theories have arisen in an attempt to explain its meaning.

Following are the major interpretations proposed as to the significance of this text.

FIRST: Christ went to Hell (or Hades) between the time of His death and resurrection and preached to the lost souls in torment there. For example, the Apostles' Creed states, in part, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. And in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into hell; the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sit on the right hand of God the Father Almighty." That Jesus literally went to Hell to preach to

the lost was the view of Clement of Alexandria (c. 200 AD), among others. Generally it is felt by those who embrace this particular view that the only lost souls preached to on that occasion, however, were the ones from the time of the flood. All other lost souls were simply ignored.

There are obviously some major problems associated with this interpretation, not the least of which is the "doctrine of the second chance." Was Jesus really extending the opportunity of salvation to "lost souls" already in torment? And if so, why only to these select few lost souls, and not to all lost souls?

<u>SECOND:</u> A Roman Catholic view is that Christ went to the place known as *Limbus Patrum* (some RC's refer to Limbus Patrum as the bosom of Abraham) between His death and resurrection. His purpose for going there at that time was to release the souls of the righteous who had repented prior to the flood, but who could not enter heaven until after the coming of the Messiah. Thus, *Limbo* was the abode between heaven and hell where the disembodied spirits of the OT saints were kept in waiting, according to this view. I do not think we have to spend too time to discover that such a view has no basis in biblical Truth.

<u>THIRD:</u> A third view is that during the time between His death and resurrection Jesus preached to the "fallen angels" who were being kept in bonds until Judgment (in a special location known as Tartarus -- 2 Peter 2:4).

2 Peter 2:4 For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell (*tartaroo*) and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment;

These were also the ones (according to this view) who were known as the "sons of God," and who took wives for themselves from among the daughters of men (Gen. 6:1-4). According to this interpretation these children born of fallen angels and women, were utterly evil and yet very clever and shrewd, causing God to proclaim that He was sorry that He made man. They were supposedly the objects of Christ's *kerusso* offering them a chance of repentance. Furthermore, the "sons of God"

of which Gen 6:1-4 speaks lived long before Noah and it might be a stretch to imagine that the apostle Peter would refer to them as the spirits in prison.

<u>FOURTH:</u> The fourth major view, one held by some of the modern scholars, is that after the resurrection, when Jesus ascended into heaven, He passed through the Hadean realm, and also through the areas where fallen angels were being held, and proclaimed His victory to them as He returned to the Father. This was not a proclamation for the purpose of saving them, but rather a declaration of their ultimate eternal defeat.

This interpretation is held mostly on the principles that all of the God-man, Jesus Christ, was accounted for and no descent into hell, or any other place, could have taken place without injuring the precise account given for all of Him – His body, soul and Divinity. The only time during which such a *kerusso* could have been made, was when Christ ascended into heaven passing through those heavenly places where the spiritual forces of wickedness reside.

Eph 6:12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.

FIFTH: This interpretation asserts that it was the Spirit of Christ who preached the message of salvation through His servant Noah unto the people of Noah's day, and that this proclamation occurred during those years prior to the flood. This was also the view of St. Augustine (c. 400 AD), was the view, which dominated the theological scene for centuries, and is the interpretation embraced by most scholars today.

Noah was "a preacher of righteousness" (2 Peter 2:5), so we conclude that these lost beings (bound and imprisoned in sin while alive) were having the message of salvation proclaimed to them through Noah's efforts. The Old Testament prophets were preaching their message to the lost people about them by means of "the Spirit of Christ within them".

1 Peter 1:10, 11 As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful searches and inquiries, ¹¹seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow.

Therefore, Peter, in the context of this epistle, confirms for us that the "Spirit of Christ" was proclaiming the "good news" through the OT spokesmen of God. And among those Old Testament prophets, according to Peter, was Noah. Thus, Christ was preaching to those people before their physical deaths, prior to the coming of the flood, through Noah. Proponents of this interpretation use Isaiah 61:1 and Psalm 142:6, 7 to show that it's a biblical concept to view living people as prisoners in sin.

There is nothing in the passage that suggests that Jesus preached while dead. The 'spirits in prison' are very definitely placed in the days of Noah, and it is also shown that Christ (as the eternal WORD) was preaching through Noah by the Holy Spirit.

The concept that Jesus descended into hell is crucial to the understanding of 1 Peter 3:19+ because if we understand the former, the purpose of the latter will be clearer.

The Apostles Creed states the order Christ's suffering as follows:

Christ "...suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; ... descended into hell [and on] the third day He rose again from the dead.

Is there a chronological significance to this order? No, there is not. The descent into hell in the Creed follows the burial of Christ, not because it was accomplished after his burial, but because it is an explanation of what precedes concerning His passion, death and burial, lest something should be detracted from these.

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The first Creed did not contain the descent into hell phrase and it was added later when it became evident that Christ's suffering, in addition to his bodily suffering, was neglected. This phrase was added to confirm that Christ did not only die bodily and was buried, but that He also suffered in soul the most extreme torments and hellish agonies such as all the ungodly shall forever endure.

The order of the Creed is, therefore, correct, placing the heaviest part of Christ's sufferings last for it proceeds from the pains of the body to those of the soul, from the visible to the invisible and from the lighter to the heavier.

If we look at the words spoken during Christ's final moments, we see the following undeniable benchmarks:

- 1. Jesus cries out to the Father: (Mat 27:46) About the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "ELI, ELI, LAMA SABACHTHANI?" that is, "MY GOD, MY GOD, why have you forsaken me?"
- 2. John 19:30, "It is finished."
- 3. Just before He died, Jesus said, (Luke 23:46) "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

Although the account of Jesus' last words are not the same that John and Luke recorded, it doesn't matter whether Jesus said "It is finished" before or after He said "Father, into your hands I commit my Spirit."

What we need to consider is that a separation between Jesus and the Father occurred when He cried out why the Father has forsaken him. That separation between the Father and the Son is an unthinkable suffering but, a necessary suffering so that our separation with the Father can be mended.

One could ask the question: when was this separation between the Father and the Son restored? Without trying to inquire about things not revealed to us in Scripture, we know that the final remedy of this separation took place when Jesus ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father. So, Jesus soul was for three days in heaven while His body was bound in

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Hades, in His grave, and with his resurrection reunited with His body. We dare not speculate what Jesus' soul was doing during these three days, but we may safely conclude that the separation was not completely removed until the glorified body of the "first-born from the dead" could take His rightful place on the throne of God.

Col 1:18 He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything.

We know that Jesus' soul was taken up into heaven directly at his death, so His soul couldn't have descended anywhere to proclaim anything to spirits in heaven. Jesus' body was laid in a grave until His resurrection, so his body didn't go anywhere, and His Divinity was already everywhere as it has been from eternity, so it could not descend or ascend or go from one place to another.

Let us remember that "He descended into hell" means that after Jesus cried out "it is finished," the measure of suffering and of obedience was filled. All that was to be borne of the wrath of God against the sin of all the elect had been endured to the end. Nothing, emphatically nothing remained to procure for us eternal righteousness and life. The Son of God had tasted and endured all there was to be tasted and endured. He fully suffered the agony of death as the expression of God's just wrath.

That is the meaning of his descent into hell.

The expressions of 1 Peter 3:18-20 should be viewed with what we have concluded about His descent into hell. There is no reason to believe that there was any need to preach to spirits in prison, which would imply that hearing the gospel would have had some latent benefit for them. It's just not so.

We could, then, conclude that two positions concerning 1 Peter 3:18-20 are the most reasonable:

1. The proclamation (kerusso) made to the spirits were made by the Spirit of Christ through Noah to those people who

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- lived at the time of the construction of the ark but who where in bondage to sin.
- 2. Jesus made the proclamation of His victory to those spirits who are in the "heavenly places" and He made this proclamation by His visible ascension into heaven passing through the heavenly places.

The most egregious conclusion would be to hold to the Roman Catholic position that a state of Limbo exists in which the Old Testament saints have been kept until Jesus appeared to open heaven for them.

This is not a passage that should cause the believer to stumble or suffer injury to his or her faith in the gospel.

Next week we will deal with the benefits of knowing that Christ has descended into hell and whether we may believe in other things spiritual also.