

Christ's Descent Into Sheol

TEXT: 1 Peter 3:18-20

INTRODUCTION: Peter began as a fisherman, but he was never a simpleton. In fact he owned his own fishing business, and he was successful enough to have purchased a large house in Capernaum.

While we may remember that Peter seemed to let his tongue go into motion before he put his brain in gear, none the less, it was Peter who often understood the Master first and best. So it was Peter who dared to answer the question Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter boldly proclaimed, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Mt. 16:16

Some thirty years after Peter saw the vacated grave clothes of Jesus lying limp in His tomb, Peter wrote some of his fellow Jews who had, like himself, trusted in Jesus as his Lord and the promised Messiah. By this time, Peter had grown greatly in both his understanding and his walk with the risen Christ. Both of his letters to these Jewish believers living in the region occupied by modern day Turkey reflect deep Christian maturity and strong theological understanding.

Knowing these things about Peter keeps us from being surprised that in his first letter, which we read this week if you are reading through the New Testament with us, that one of the passages he writes is often labeled one of the most difficult texts in the Bible. **Our text deals with the time between the burial of Christ and His resurrection from the dead.**

- What happened to Jesus during this time, from before nightfall on Friday until the break of day on Sunday?
- Did He just lie there in the tomb?
- What of His soul and spirit?
- Was Jesus in a state of suspended animation?
- What happened while Jesus was in the tomb?

Peter tells us in our text.

1 Peter 3:18-20 18 For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, 19 by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison, 20 who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while *the* ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water.

I want to offer you **two keys to this passage of Scripture** which will unlock this text and many, many others in the Bible if you will use them.

1. **Let the text speak for itself.** Do not allegorize, symbolize, or spiritualize unless the text or a related text so indicates, or the clear sense of the text demands it. Most of the time, when the Bible speaks in symbol, the text will tell you so. The single largest reason people find this text difficult is that they do not want to believe what it says at face value.
2. **Compare this passage with similar passages elsewhere in the Bible.** In fact other passages that relate to this one are often labeled individually as "difficult to understand." But if you put them all together, they fit together like pieces of a puzzle, each one adding clarity to the other.

So, let us just ask basic questions to this text and seek answers from this text and other passages related to it.

I. WHO ARE THE SPIRITS IN PRISON?

The text says that Christ preached to spirits in prison.

A. Disobedient

B. During the days of Noah while the ark was being built. So, let us go to that portion of Scripture that describes the time while Noah was building the ark.

C. These are the fallen angelic "sons of God" of Gen. 6:1-5 who sinned by cohabitating with human women and by so doing increased the wickedness of an already exceedingly sinful world.

Gen. 6:1, 2, 4 1 Now it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born to them, 2 that the sons of God saw the daughters of men, that they *were* beautiful; and they took wives for themselves of all whom they chose. 4 There were giants on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men and they bore children to them. Those *were* the mighty men who *were* of old, men of renown.

D. Other passages? Doing a few searches on key words leads us to discover other passages related to this.

1. 2 Peter 2:4 For if God did not spare the angels who sinned, but cast them down to hell and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment;
2. Jude 6 And the angels who did not keep their proper domain, but left their own abode, He has reserved in everlasting chains under darkness for the judgment of the great day;
3. Revelation 9:1-2 Then the fifth angel sounded: And I saw a star fallen from heaven to the earth. To him was given the key to the bottomless pit. And he

opened the bottomless pit, and smoke arose out of the pit like the smoke of a great furnace. So the sun and the air were darkened because of the smoke of the pit.

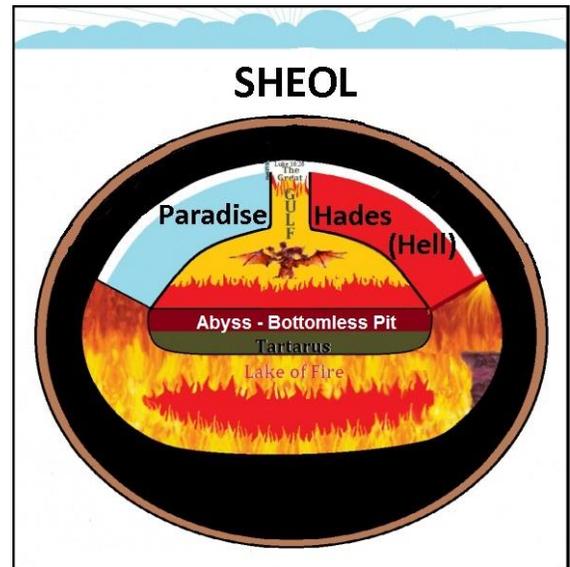
II. WHAT AND WHERE IS THE PRISON?

The prison is a part of what the Old Testament calls Sheol.

The reason many do not understand what the Bible means by Sheol, which is a Hebrew name, is because the word Sheol is translated as grave, pit, death, or hell in many English translations. This is a mistake in translation. Sheol is a place name.

A. Sheol in the Bible

1. Sheol - the abode of the dead
 - a. for the unrighteous
 - b. and the righteous



If you would like to check this out for yourself, and I hope you will, look at my sermon notes on our church website. I have included a chart I found showing all 65 places in the Old Testament that the word Sheol is used, and how it is translated in a number of Bibles.

Translation of Sheol in the Old Testament									
	1611 KJV	KJV	Geneva Bible	NIV	NKJV	NASB & NRSV	YLT	Ro & LXX*1	Vulgate
Gn. 37:35	grave	grave	grave	grave*2	grave	Sheol	Sheol	hades*3	infernum
Gn. 42:38	grave	grave	grave	grave*2	grave	Sheol	sheol	hades	inferos
Gn. 44:29	grave	grave	grave	grave*2	grave	Sheol	sheol	hades	inferos
Gn. 44:31	grave	grave	grave	grave	grave	Sheol	sheol	hades	inferos
Nu. 16:30	pit	pit	pit	grave*2	pit	Sheol	Sheol	hades	infernum
Nu. 16:33	pit	pit	pit	grave	pit	Sheol	Sheol	hades	infernum
Dt. 32:22	lowest hell	hell	bottom of hell	the realm of death*4	hell	Sheol	Sheol	hades	inferni
1Sa. 2:6	grave	grave	grave	grave	grave	Sheol	Sheol	hades	infernum
2Sa. 22:6	Hell	hell	grave	grave*2	Sheol	Sheol	Sheol	hades	inferi
1Ki. 2:6	grave	grave	grave	grave*2	grave	Sheol	Sheol	hades	inferos
1Ki. 2:9	grave	grave	grave	grave	grave	Sheol	Sheol	hades	infernum
Job 7:9	grave	grave	grave	grave*2	grave	Sheol	Sheol	hades	inferos
Job 11:8	hell	hell	hell	grave*2	Sheol	Sheol	Sheol	hades	inferno
Job 14:13	grave	grave	grave	grave*2	grave	Sheol	Sheol	hades	inferno
Job 17:13	grave	grave	grave	grave*2	grave	Sheol	Sheol	hades	inferus
Job 17:16	pit	pit	pit	death*2	Sheol	Sheol	Sheol	hades	infernum
	1611 KJV	KJV	Geneva Bible	NIV	NKJV	NASB & NRSV	YLT	Ro & LXX*1	Vulgate
Job 21:13	grave	grave	grave	grave*2	grave	Sheol	Sheol	hades	inferna
Job 24:19	grave	grave	grave	grave*2	grave	Sheol	Sheol	hades	inferos
Job 26:6	Hell	hell	grave	Death*2	Sheol	Sheol	Sheol	hades	infernus

Ps. 6:5	grave	grave	grave	grave*2	grave	Sheol	Sheol	hades	inferno
Ps. 9:17	hell	hell	hell	grave*2	hell	Sheol	Sheol	hades	infernum*11
Ps. 16:10	hell	hell	grave	grave*2	Sheol	Sheol	Sheol	hades	N/A
Ps. 18:5	hell	hell	grave	grave*2	Sheol	Sheol	Sheol	hades	N/A
Ps. 30:3	grave	grave	grave	grave*2	grave	Sheol	Sheol	hades	N/A
Ps. 31:17	grave	grave	grave	grave*2	grave	Sheol	Sheol	hades	N/V
Ps. 49:14	grave	grave	grave	grave*2	grave	Sheol	Sheol	hades	N/A
Ps. 49:14*5	grave	grave	grave	grave*2	grave	Sheol	Sheol	hades	N/A
Ps. 49:15	grave	grave	grave	grave	grave	Sheol	Sheol	hades	N/A
Ps. 55:15	hell	hell	grave	grave*2	hell	Sheol	Sheol	hades	N/V
Ps. 86:13	hell	hell	lowest grave	grave*2	Sheol	Sheol	Sheol	hades	N/V
Ps. 88:3	grave	grave	grave	grave*2	grave	Sheol	Sheol	hades	N/A
Ps. 89:48	grave	grave	grave	grave*2	grave	Sheol	Sheol	hades	N/V
	1611 KJV	KJV	Geneva Bible	NIV	NKJV	NASB & NRSV	YLT	Ro & LXX*1	Vulgate
Ps. 116:3	hell	hell	grave	grave*2	Sheol	Sheol	Sheol	hades	N/V
Ps. 139:8	hell	hell	hell	depths*2	hell	Sheol	Sheol	hades	N/A
Ps. 141:7	graves	grave	graves	grave*2	grave	Sheol	*6	hades	N/A
Pr. 1:12	grave	grave	grave	grave*2	Sheol	Sheol	Sheol	hades	infernus
Pr. 5:5	hell	hell	hell	grave*2	hell	Sheol	Sheol	hades	inferos
Pr. 7:27	hell	hell	grave	grave*2	hell	Sheol	Sheol	hades	inferi
Pr. 9:18	hell	hell	hell	grave*2	hell	Sheol	Sheol	hades	inferni
Pr. 15:11	Hell	hell	Hell	Death*2	hell	Sheol	Sheol	hades	infernus
Pr. 15:24	hell	hell	hell	grave*2	hell	Sheol	Sheol	hades	inferno

Pr. 23:14	hell	hell	hell*7	death*2	hell	Sheol	Sheol	hades	inferno	Jon. 2:2	hell	hell*9	hell	grave*2	Sheol	Sheol	sheol	hades	inferni*12
Pr. 27:20	Hell	hell	graue	Death*2	hell	Sheol	Sheol	hades	infernus	Hab. 2:5	hell	hell	hell	grave*2	hell	Sheol	sheol	hades	infernus
Pr. 30:16	graue	grave	graue	grave*2	grave	Sheol	Sheol	hades	infernus	<p>*1 Rotherham's Emphasized Bible says hades is almost uniform Septuagint (LXX) rendering of the Hebrew sheol, which is found 65 times in the OT {appendix, p.270}.</p> <p>*2 note says Hebrew Sheol</p> <p>*3 note says sheol or hades</p> <p>*4 note says Hebrew to Sheol</p> <p>*5 the word sheol occurs twice in the verse.</p> <p>*6 Saul, not Sheol</p> <p>*7 Margin: " that is, from destruction"</p> <p>*8 NASB: Sheol, NRSV: grave</p> <p>*9 marg. or, The grave {The New Englishman's Hebrew Concordance, p.1220}.</p> <p>*10 spelled with one l in the original</p> <p>*11 verse 18 in the Latin Vulgate and Douay-Rheims Bibles.</p> <p>*12 verse 3 in the Latin Vulgate and Douay-Rheims Bibles.</p> <p>N/A = Not Available. The word does not appear in these verses in the Vulgate.</p> <p>N/V = No Verse. The verse does not appear in the Vulgate.</p> <p>The German 1905 Elberfelder version uses Scheol</p> <p>The Latin Vulgate uses inferos in various forms</p> <p>The RSV follows the NRSV</p> <p>Darby uses Sheol throughout the OT</p> <p>Note:</p> <p>Ez. 31:16,17</p> <p>Original 1611 KJV;</p> <p>I made the nations to shake at the sound of his fall, when I cast him <u>downe</u> to hell with them that descend <u>downe</u> into the pit; and all the trees of Eden, the choice and best of Lebanon, all that <u>drinke</u> water, shall be comforted in the nether parts of the earth. They also went <u>downe</u> into hell with him <u>unto</u> them that be <u>slaine</u> with the sword, and they that were his <u>arme</u>, that dwelt <u>under</u> his shadows in the <u>middest</u> of the heathen.</p> <p>Contemporary KJV;</p> <p>I made the nations to shake at the sound of his fall, when I cast <i>him</i> down to hell with them that descend into the pit; and all the trees of Eden, the choice and best of Lebanon, all that drink water, shall be comforted in the nether parts of the earth. <i>They</i> also went down into hell with him <i>unto them that be slain</i> with the sword; and <i>they that were</i> his arm, <i>that dwelt</i> under his shadow in the midst of the heathen.</p> <p>NKJV;</p> <p>I made the nations shake at the sound of its fall, when I cast it down to hell together with those who descend into the Pit; and all the trees of Eden, the choice and best of Lebanon, all that drink water, were comforted in the depths of the earth. They also went down to hell with it, with those <i>slain</i> by the sword; and <i>those who were</i> its <i>strong</i> arm dwelt in its shadows among the nations.</p> <p>Note: 1611 KJV also contained the 14 Apocryphal books which we did not include in the count.</p> <p>Note: Grave was spelled <u>graue</u> in 1611 KJV and Geneva bible</p>									
Ec. 9:10	graue	grave	graue	grave*2	grave	Sheol	Sheol	hades	inferos										
SS. 8:6	graue	grave	graue	grave*2	grave	Sheol / grave*8	Sheol	hades	inferus										
Is. 5:14	hell	hell	hell	grave*2	hell	Sheol	Sheol	hades	infernus										
Is. 14:9	Hell	hell*9	Hell	grave*2	hell	Sheol	Sheol	hades	infernus										
	1611 KJV	KJV	Geneva Bible	NIV	NKJV	NASB & NRSV	YLT	Ro & LXX*1	Vulgate										
Is. 14:11	Hell	grave	graue	grave	hell	Sheol	Sheol	hades	inferos										
Is. 14:15	hel*10	hell	graue	grave	hell	Sheol	Sheol	hades	infernum										
Is. 28:15	hell	hell	hell	grave*2	hell	Sheol	Sheol	hades	inferno										
Is. 28:18	hell	hell	hell	grave	hell	Sheol	Sheol	hades	inferno										
Is. 38:10	graue	grave	graue	death*2	hell	Sheol	Sheol	hades	inferi										
Is. 38:18	graue	grave	graue	grave*2	hell	Sheol	Sheol	hades	infernus										
Is. 57:9	hell	hell	hell	grave*2	hell	Sheol	Sheol	hades	inferos										
Ez. 31:15	graue	grave	hell	grave*2	hell	Sheol	sheol	hades	inferos										
Ez. 31:16	hell	hell	hell	grave	hell	Sheol	sheol	hades	infernum										
Ez. 31:17	hell	hell	hel*10	grave	hell	Sheol	sheol	hades	infernum										
Ez. 32:21	hell	hell	hell	grave*2	hell	Sheol	sheol	hades	inferni										
Ez. 32:27	hell	hell	graue	grave	hell	Sheol	sheol	hades	infernum										
Ho. 13:14	graue	grave	graue	grave*2	grave	Sheol	Sheol	hades	mortis										
Ho. 13:14*5	graue	grave	graue	grave*2	Grave	Sheol	Sheol	hades	inferne										
Am. 9:2	hell	hell	hell	grave*2	hell	Sheol	sheol	hades	infernum										

Sheol has several parts.

2. Paradise - place of comfort and waiting for the atonement for believers.

3. Hades or Hell - place of fire and torment where unbelievers await the final judgment.

4. Great gulf between Paradise and Hell **Luke 16:26** *And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.'*

5. At the bottom of the great gulf is Tartarus, also called the Abyss, or the bottomless pit.

B. Tartarus (or the bottomless pit) is where these demonic creatures, these fallen angels, spirits, are imprisoned.

1. This is the prison where the demons that sinned so grievously during the years before the Great Flood are in chains.

2. This is the pit that will be opened during the Tribulation and demons loosed on the earth.

III. WHAT DID CHRIST DO?

A. He went

1. in the Spirit

2. between His death and resurrection

- a. Remember, **when we die, only the body dies, not the soul and spirit.**
2 Corinthians 5:8 We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord.
- b. **So while the lifeless body of Jesus lay in the tomb the rest of Friday, Saturday, and early Sunday until near daybreak, where was the Spirit of Jesus?**
- c. Even without this passage, we know if we think about it.
- d. **On Friday afternoon before He died, He told someone where He would be later that day.** Luke 23:43 And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."
- e. **So Jesus, in the Spirit, before His bodily resurrection on Sunday morning, went to Paradise in Sheol.**

B. Not to suffer the pains of hell. (He suffered once, not twice.)

C. He preached (proclaimed). This is not the word for "preach the gospel." This word means to announce.

1. **His vicarious death - once for all, the just for the unjust.**

2. **Who heard?**

- a. **The believers awaiting the saving sacrifice** of Isaiah's Suffering Servant and John the Baptist's Lamb of God, wept with tears of joy and shouted hallelujahs to the Son of God and prepared to follow Him as upon His resurrection He would lead captivity captive and move Paradise to the third heaven, the residence of God.
- b. **The imprisoned spirits** for sure; and I picture the hideous creatures, their deceptive beauty with which they could appear as angels of light stripped away, cowering, spitting, snarling in the presence of their Conqueror and Captor, knowing that this announcement means they are doomed for eternity without hope of ever overcoming the power of the God who made them to be His ministering spirits but against whom they rebelled in the attempt to follow Satan.

- c. But I suspect **the lost, the unbelievers in hell, also heard**. And they wept tears without mix of joy, grief without any end, terror without any hope, for the day of decision, the time of opportunity had passed them by. There would be no second chance.
3. **After Jesus made His proclamation, He came back to the face of this earth and by the power of God Almighty, entered into His resurrection body, and came out of the tomb.**
4. And He led those OT believers out of Sheol and many of them were seen walking the streets of Jerusalem after His resurrection, and **He moved Paradise to the third heaven**, to the New Jerusalem, the eternal City of God, where it remains to this day.

Matthew 27:52-53 52 and the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; 53 and coming out of the graves after His resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many.

5. **Paul also refers to Christ's descent into Sheol.**

Ephesians 4:8-9

8 Therefore He says:

"When He ascended on high,

He led captivity captive,

And gave gifts to men."

9 (Now this, *"He ascended"*—what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth?)

"Led captivity captive" is a reference to ancient kings victory parade in which they marched back into their capital city, parading not only the spoils of war in terms of goods and prisoners, but **their own recaptured soldiers**, freed from the prison camps of their conquered foes.

Jesus set those still held captive by death in Sheol, although held in the comfort of house arrest, so to speak, held none the less. With the price for sin paid on the cross, Jesus led those who believed in Him before the cross from Paradise in Sheol to their new home in the third heaven.

IV. WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR US?

- A. **Jesus has absolute authority and victory over everything, including the demonic.**

1. **The demonic world is very real.** While much today is written about demons that is fantasy, this is in itself the devil's deceitful strategy. He wants you to

think demons are mythological, but they are not! He and the fallen angels are very real!

- a. **Only a portion of the demons were cast to the pit.**
- b. **Others live in the second heaven, the atmosphere or space.**
- c. **They can visit the earth.**
- d. **They can indwell the lost.**
- e. **They can oppress the saved who by certain sins open their lives to their influence** such as through astrology, fortune telling, or channeling.

Deut. 18:9-12 9 "When you come into the land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominations of those nations. 10 There shall not be found among you *anyone* who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, *or one* who practices witchcraft, *or a soothsayer*, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, 11 or one who conjures spells, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. 12 For all who do these things *are* an abomination to the LORD, and because of these abominations the LORD your God drives them out from before you.

Do you hear that? God says, "Do not practice witchcraft or sorcery; do not conjure spells, do not use omens, or mediums, or try to contact dead people."

More and more children and teenagers in America are doing these very things. Bookstores have "how to" books and the internet is full of instructions and encouragement to use spells or powers to get your way with someone or something.

There are lots of books, movies, and games that make witchcraft and sorcery look like it's just fun and games. Books like the Harry Potter series. In the book Harry practices witchcraft, only his is called white magic. And Harry's use of witchcraft always turns out good.

But that is not what really happens. Why do you think God warns us in the Bible not to have anything to do with witchcraft and sorcery? Because God knows that the demons use these things to deceive people. And the use of these things opens the door of your life to demonic influence.

When I was a young teen, my friends and I began to play with what we thought was a game. It was called a Ouija Board. It is still sold as a game today, put out by Parker Brothers. But it is not a game! It is also sold online with witchcraft supplies, and it is sometimes called a Witch Board.

My friends and I did not know this. We were not trying to practice witchcraft or sorcery. We were just playing. We would ask the board questions and it would give us answers. And we would laugh and make fun. But then we started to take the answers more seriously. And we started thinking about what the board was saying.

And in just a few weeks, after only playing with the board a half dozen times, my friends and I almost got in very serious trouble.

And when God spared us, we put that Ouija Board away and never touched it again. You know, when I was young, no one thought to warn me not to mess with things like that. But I am warning you! I am showing you in God's Word. God says don't. Don't fool around with anything that has to do with witchcraft or sorcery or wizards or spells or fortune telling or mediums – not books, not websites, not games, nothing! It opens the door of your life to allow a very bad influence you do not want to let in.

Now let me repeat.

1. The demonic world is very real. BUT

2. Jesus is the Lord over them all.

a. Demons can only do what they have permission to do.

1 John 4:4 You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.

If a believer does not open the door to demonic influence through sin or tampering with some form of the occult, he or she can rest securely in the overcoming power of Christ.

b. The born again believer who is walking faithfully with the Lord has absolutely nothing to fear from demons.

This is one of many reasons for each of us to be “totally consumed” with Jesus. He is Lord of all. Even the worst that the devil has to offer cannot overcome the wonderful power of our Lord. He is worthy of our worship. He is worthy of our praise. He is worthy of every expression of thanksgiving. He is worthy of our devotion. He is worthy of our service. He is worthy of our committing our entire life to Him.

B. The clear pivotal point of eternity for every person is the cross.

C. Jesus' journey between the cross and the resurrection clearly shows us the reality of hell.

1. His ascension before a great crowd of people also shows us the reality of heaven.

2. And both leave us with the necessity of decision while there is still opportunity.

CONCLUSION:

1. Trust Christ.

2. Live in His victory. Abandon things of occult and demons.
3. Grow in understanding through studying the Word of God.
4. Walk in obedience to Him.