



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“Did Jesus Go to Hell?”

Scripture Lessons: *Isaiah 61:1-2(a); 1 Peter 3:15 (b)-21*

*This sermon was preached by The Rev. Dr. L. Holton Siegling Jr.  
on May 7, 2023, at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church  
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## **Isaiah 61:1-2(a)**

### **The Good News of Deliverance**

1 The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,  
because the Lord has anointed me;  
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,  
to bind up the broken-hearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and release to the prisoners;  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour

## **1 Peter 3:15(b)-21**

<sup>1</sup>but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; <sup>16</sup>yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear; so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. <sup>17</sup>For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. <sup>18</sup>For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, <sup>19</sup>in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, <sup>20</sup>who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight people, were saved through water. <sup>21</sup>And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you – not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

## **Did Jesus Go to Hell?**

So, this was the sermon title – “The person I’d most like to see go to hell.” ... And as we might imagine – there in bold letters out on the church sign – the sermon to come was the talk of the town.

Some, I suspect came in hopes that the sermon would talk about the unscrupulous business owner ... or that promiscuous person. People were curious if whose indiscretions would be mentioned; though I think that many of them also came with not a little bit of hope that the pastor would not mention their own. Well, Sunday morning came, and the church was packed!

Alas, it ended up being false advertising! Instead of someone who perhaps by outward indications

deserved consideration the pastor chose, instead, for that person he'd most like to see go to hell – he chose the saintliest person of them all ... he chose an older Sunday School teacher – so old that some joked that she personally had known Methuselah. Of all people, she was the person who the pastor wanted to see go to hell ... and the reason, the reason that was stated is that she was a person who would make the biggest difference in the lives of the souls who were there.

Now, obviously, that illustration is replete with theological flaws, but its origin – its motivation – is the passage we read in 1 Peter chapter 3 ...

... that place where it says that Jesus was “made alive in the spirit” (though perhaps the better translation is “by” the spirit since we know the Jesus Spirit was not dead) ... that place where it says that Jesus, by the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey ...”

These few verses provide the Scriptural underpinnings for the Apostle's Creed, where it says that Jesus, “descended into hell.” Such a Scriptural warrant also comes from Ephesians chapter 4: “When it says, ‘He ascended,’ what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the Earth?”

It may come as a surprise to hear that some people, even some churches, really struggle with the idea that Jesus (holy and perfect), the very son of the Living God ... that he would descend to hell.

I've been, even to a Presbyterian Church, and when we got to that part of the creed, they corporately affirmed that Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried ... and on the third day he arose again from the dead ...”

In some versions of the Apostle's Creed, there is simply a little footnote to remind the reader that that part of the traditional creed is omitted.

You may find it interesting to know that the earliest versions of the Apostle's Creed, have no mention of Jesus' descent into hell. In fact, it's not until the third, some think the fourth century, where we find reference to it.

But when the Creed comes into its final form in the late 8<sup>th</sup> century, the issue of its inclusion seems largely resolved, meaning ... it's there. And since that time, it has been an official part of the Apostle's Creed for most of Christ's Church.

I think that's where some people get hung up – and understandably so. If they know the story of Jesus, he says to the thief on the cross, “Today you'll be with me in paradise.” And so, if Jesus was going to go to hell, but he was also going to be with that man in paradise that day ... then his trip to hell had to be

awfully quick.

For that reason and others, people of great faith – people like John Calvin – held to Jesus' descent into hell, but not as a literal three-day visit nor as a means of evangelism.

Friends, the Creed may say it. But the Creed is still subordinate to the Bible ... and the Bible, I dare say, gives us a lot to think about on the matter.

As reformed Christians we hold that Scripture interprets Scripture and when there is something in one place that makes us scratch our heads, we turn to other places that might help us understand the issue more clearly.

For example, how do we hold in reverent tension the idea that Jesus was witnessing to souls in prison with God's Word which says elsewhere that, "And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment."

Consider the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus. The "Rich Man wanted his loved ones to not have to endure the pain and the hardship that he was enduring in hell (hell which was for him after death a very present reality. ... a reality he could not escape ... "a great chasm" that had been fixed we are told ... a gap that would not be crossed.

No, when we die we meet the Lord our God, our maker. And at that time, we will be known as the Lamb of God's own answer of God's all redeeming (or not) flock. Indeed, upon our passing our fate does not remain undecided.

(pause)

To the matter at hand, John Calvin perceives Jesus' experience of hell as the full brunt of his atoning work which was experienced by Jesus on the cross ...

It's interesting, Calvin would affirm the assertion of the Apostle's Creed but would do so with a different order – a different sequence. Calvin would assert that Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified – descended into hell – was dead and buried." Why? Because Calvin holds that Jesus did, in fact, descend into hell, but that that happened while Jesus was on the cross ... it happened, when Jesus, for our sake, was "made to be sin, who knew no sin, and who felt the brunt of that sin ... suffered it ... felt the profound weight of it ..."

And under that weight, would we not be crushed? Would we not be forsaken? As Jesus experiences the separation from God that should be ours, listen to what he says: "My god, My God, why has thou forsaken me?"

Jesus was taking upon himself the punishment that was ours, the pain ... the suffering ... the hell – and when it is accomplished ... when the debt is paid ... when the transaction is processed ... when it is complete ... ah, it is, as Jesus said, “finished.” Nothing more needs to be done but to rise and ascend!

But that begs another question ... if it is finished, and if ours would be an eternity (of separation from God) then how can that be accomplished and in such a brief amount of time on the cross ...

I love the following joke. A man meets God and asks him: “Is it true that to you, O Lord, a thousand years are like a minute?” And God ways, “Yes.” To which the man responds, “And is it true that a penny is like a million dollars to you?” And again, God says, “Yes.” To which the man then responds, “God cold you spare a penny?” And God says, “Sure, I’ll get to it in just a minute.”

The value of Jesus – God’s son – the value of the Word made flesh on the cross is of infinite value. And so the justice that otherwise would be our due for all eternity can be resolved because of what amounts to a far greater sacrifice than any that we ourselves could make.

Still, if that is the case, then what are we to make of Jesus’ proclamation to the spirits in prison? If we are going to begin to understand Jesus’ descent into hell, then we will have to ask that question, too.

(pause)

I was talking with our Thursday Table Talk Bible Study participants last week, and I mentioned that I bit off more than I could chew with this morning’s sermon title. I mean, it sounded fine on Tuesday or so, and when the bulletin information was due, but as the week progressed, it became very apparent to me that there was no way in 20 minutes or so that I could reconcile the grappling and heartfelt questions around this topic that have existed for centuries.

Maybe the best we can do is to put ourselves in a better position to think about those questions, and to remember that faith is often a matter of resting comfortably in that which we don’t entirely understand.

And so, to the question of how to understand Jesus’ proclamation to the spirits in prison, let me pose at least three ways we can understand it. The first is according to the Apostle’s Creed, the second is a more traditional and protestant perspective, and the third a lesser-held view, albeit one that really makes me think.

The first, we can take the Apostle’s Creed at face value ... which is what the Apostle’s Creed seems to do with 1 Peter Chapter 3 ... and so, when it says that Jesus “went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison,” that that’s exactly what it means.

A second view recognizes that 1 Peter chapter 3 leaves open to interpretation the actual timing and even the place. The Bible clearly says that Jesus talks to spirits who were formerly in prison; but, we need to remember that Noah – the example that was given – he was actually saved!

Abraham, he too believed, and it was reckoned unto him as righteousness ... and so it is not beyond comprehension to say that Jesus did, in fact, witness to those who in former times were prisoners to sin and bound for hell. That his message of salvation was very much made alive in their hearts by the inward witness of the Holy Spirit.

To put it another way, that spirit by which Jesus is said to be made alive – that's the same spirit that made Noah and Abraham and all those who lived in former times alive ... it was that witness ... that incredible and saving work of the pre-incarnate Jesus himself (remember, we are talking about Jesus who is none other than the Word that was with God in the beginning) ... in this way, it was Jesus, who by the inward witness of the Holy Spirit, actually saved those people.

The third view, which I must admit is peripheral to the main expository thrust of 1 Peter Chapter 3, nevertheless provides a powerful and practical application.

When considering Jesus' descent into hell, and considering the aforementioned proclamation to the spirits in prison ... let's think back to Isaiah 61 ... our Old Testament lesson this morning ...

That's the passage that Jesus read when he preached his first sermon ... the Scriptures were opened, and he read from those verses, and, as he did so, he also personified those verses ...

"The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor ..."

And when John the Baptizer's disciples came to Jesus sometime later, and when they asked him if he was the one who was to come or if they should wait for another, listen again to how Jesus responded ...

"Go and tell John what you have seen and heard; the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them."

Jesus was essentially saying to them, if you really want to know if I am the one who was to come, all you have to do is look at Isaiah 61 ... it tells you right there what I should be doing ... am I not doing that?

In the Archbishop of Canterbury's sermon from yesterday's coronation of King Charles III, he said ... "What is given today is for the gain of all. For Jesus Christ announced a Kingdom in which the poor and oppressed are freed from the chains of injustice. The blind see. The bruised and broken-hearted are healed."

Clearly the Archbishop had in mind the work of Jesus as having been a present reality ... part of his life and ministry ... but it's not just about justice because it seems that squarely within the purview of what Isaiah is saying is also Jesus' proclamation of repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

That that is also what it means to speak of liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners ... that those who like us – who, until we were saved by grace through faith – we were dead to sin ... in bondage, we were ... prisoners to its consequences.

Which is to say, that for the duration of Jesus' ministry among us, he was always about the business of breaking those chains ... and setting us free!

It makes me wonder about a living hell! ... Given how much David struggled throughout his life, I wonder if that was something he had in mind when God led him to write Psalm 139 ...

"Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascent to Heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol (another word for Hell) you are there." (Psalm 139:7-8)

That is no small comfort for those who mourn ... for those who grieve and distress under the weight and the burden of sin.

It makes me wonder about my own life ... I mean, I can stand up here all day long, and try to faithfully exegete the Scriptures, and consider important questions about Hell and whether or not Jesus visited a specific place, but if I forget that Hell is not just a future reality but is also a present reality ... if I don't get out of here and into here, then what am I doing?

If we never get out of our heads and into people's hearts ... into lives that are broken and wounded and burdened – dare I say, imprisoned – if we don't invest ourselves in those lives that need to be set free by the power of God ... then what are we doing>?

Maybe the question that pastor asked in that sermon illustration is not so crazy after all ... because the person we'd most like to see go to hell might as well be us ... because it is precisely into a fallen world that our Savior calls us to go, and as we go, to make a difference!

To that person who is held captive in a living Hell, and who does not know the difference that the love of God can make in their life ... friends, Jesus is still about the business of setting that person free ...

and he has determined that that work will be accomplished according to his good purposes ... and often, in and through us.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

\*The above sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.