

Understanding 1 Peter 3:18-20...
When Jesus was crucified, did He go to Hell?

The Apostles' Creed has a puzzling phrase of Jesus "descended into hell." In an attempt to understand it, many have wondered if this phrase was based on 1 Peter 3:19 which itself has been a conundrum for many theologians.

1. Who wrote 1 Peter and what was the intent of the letter? Consult a Bible dictionary or study Bible.

1 Peter was written by the apostle Peter and intended for believing Jews and Gentiles of North Asia Minor. About this time was the Great Fire of Rome (64 A. D.), which Nero persecuted Christians for and the official persecution of Christians by the Roman emperor Domitian (81-96 A.D.)

Having witnessed the suffering and death of Jesus, Peter saw Christ as the model and means to endure the persecutions Christians were facing. Because of Christ's resurrection and victory over death, faith in this knowledge can empower a Believer to live a life "holy and blameless" as a redeemed sinner.

1 Peter was written to encourage Believers to remain steadfast in their faith and live as a testimony of Christ, in spite of trials and sufferings, because of their assurance of salvation and glory that awaits them with Christ.

2. Study 1 Peter 3:18-20. Who are the "spirits now in prison"? Consider carefully the context of time.

The "spirits now in prison" had the following characteristics:

- a) They were "once disobedient".
- b) They existed during the time of Noah and during the construction of the Ark.
- c) They were formerly human beings, because eight of them were obedient and saved from the Flood. The eight were Noah and his wife and their three sons and respective wives (Gen 7:13).

With this context, it appears that the phrase "spirits now in prison" is in reference to unrepentant human beings who existed during the time of Noah but are now dead and residing in hell.

3. How did Jesus go and "made proclamation to the spirits now in prison"? Examine 1 Peter 1:10-11 and 2 Peter 2:4-5.

1 Peter 1:10-11 indicates that the "Spirit of Christ" spoke through the Old Testament prophets.

2 Peter 2:4-5 indicates that Noah was "a preacher of righteousness".

Jesus appears to have "made proclamation to the spirits now in prison" in Spirit through Noah, "a preacher of righteousness", during the building of the Ark in the years before the Flood.

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Peter seems to draw parallels between Noah and the readers of his epistle.

Noah	Peter's readers
1. Righteous minority surrounded by hostile unbelievers	1. Righteous minority surrounded by hostile unbelievers
2. God's judgment was near	2. God's judgment may come soon (1 Pet 4:5, 7; 2 Pet 3:10)
3. Noah witnessed boldly by the "Spirit of Christ"	3. They should witness boldly by Christ's power (1 Pet 3:14-17; 4:11)
4. Noah was finally saved	4. They will be finally saved (1 Pet 3:13-14; 4:13; 5:10)

There have been several other interpretations of this passage, but they have significant problems when considered within the context of the epistle or because they have little biblical support.

Clement of Alexandria (200 A.D.) understood this to mean that the Spirit of Christ descended to hell to proclaim the message of salvation to Old Testament sinners.

The Roman Catholic Cardinal Robert Bellarmine (1570) understood the passage to mean that the Spirit of Christ went to release the souls of Old Testament believers who repented before the Flood. Instead of hell, these believers were kept in Limbo, which was a place between heaven and hell.

Friedrich Spitta (1890) interpreted the passage as the Spirit of Christ preaching to the "sons of God", the fallen angels who had married the "daughters of men" (Gen 6:2; 2 Pet 2:4; Jude 6).

1 Peter 3:18-20 does not support the theology that upon His death, Jesus descended down to hell. When Jesus Christ died, His soul went immediately into the presence of God. His body was buried, and three days later was reunited with His Spirit and resurrected (see www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/7Humans/DeathWhatHappensSpiritWhenPeopleDie.aspx).

References:

1. Youngblood RF, Bruce FF, and Harrison RK, *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson (1995).
2. Grudem W, *Systematic Theology*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan (1994).

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