

# WHERE DID JESUS GO BETWEEN THE CRUCIFIXION AND RESURRECTION?

*G. Michael Cocoris*

Between the crucifixion and resurrection, where did Jesus go? There is one passage that clearly says that He went to heaven, but there are several passages that are used to support the claim that He went to Hades (hell).

## Luke 23:43

While hanging on the cross, Jesus said, “Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise” (Lk. 23:43). Paradise is another name for heaven. In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul speaks of someone, probably himself, who went to the third heaven (2 Cor. 12:2). He then says that person was taken to Paradise (2 Cor. 12:4). It is inescapable that Paradise is another name for heaven. Therefore, after the crucifixion, Jesus went to heaven.

## Ephesians 4:9-10

There are several passages that are used to support the theory that after the crucifixion, Jesus went to Hades. For example, Ephesians 4 says, “Now this, ‘He ascended’—what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things” (Eph. 4:9-10). The expression “the lower parts of the earth” has been taken to be a reference to Hades or hell. That interpretation does not fit the context of Ephesians 4.

In Ephesians 4, Paul teaches that all believers have the same Spirit, Lord, God, and Father, the same faith, hope, baptism, and body, but each one has a different gift (Eph. 4:2-7). Actually, Paul does not say, “Each one has a different gift,” he says, “Each one has a different grace.” He adds that this particular favor is “according to the measure of Christ’s gift.” The point is, God has given each believer a gift and the grace to exercise it.

To support his claim that the Lord has given gifts to believers, Paul quotes Psalm 68:18. He says, “When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men” (Eph. 4:8). The problem is that Psalm 68:18 says, “You received gifts,” whereas Paul says, “He gave gifts.” The solution to that problem is the Hebrew word translated “received” in Psalm 68:18 means “to receive in order to give” (Gen. 15:9; 18:5; 27:13; Ex. 27:20; 1 Sam. 20:21; etc.; Charles Hodge; Pentecost; Toussaint).

In Psalm 68, God is pictured as a mighty military conqueror who has descended from heaven, conquered Israel’s enemies and now has ascended back to heaven, leading His conquered captives and laden with the spoils of war. In ancient times, the victor shared the spoils of war with those on his side (Hodge). Thus, God, the conquering King, can be said to give gifts to men.

Paul’s *application* of Psalm 68:18 is “Now this, ‘He ascended’—what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is also the One who

ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things” (Eph. 4:9-10). His point is that an ascent implies a previous descent. Thus, Christ first descended “into the lower parts of the earth.” Then He ascended that He might fill all things, in this case, fill the church with gifts (Eph. 1:23).

The problem is the meaning of the phrase “the lower parts of the earth.” There are four interpretations of this expression: 1) the earth (Isa. 44:23; Calvin; Barnes; Hodge; Eadie; A. T. Robinson; MacDonald; Hendriksen; Bruce; Wiersbe; *NKJV Study Bible*; Lange says that is view “accepted by the majority of modern commentators”), 2) the grave (Ps. 63:9; Chrysostom; *The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*; Hoehner; Constable), 3) the womb of his mother (Ps. 139:15; Calixtus), 4) Hades (Ez. 32:24; Jerome; Bengel; Ellicott; Meyer; Robinson; JFB; Vincent).

Hodge says, “The lower parts of the earth have sometimes been taken to refer to hades or hell. But that would not fit in with the argument here: His Ascension necessitated a previous descent to earth but not to hell. In addition, the Scriptures indicate that Christ’s spirit went to heaven, not hell, when He died (Luke 23:43, 23:46).” The proof that the correct explanation is that Christ descended to the earth, not hell, is that Paul is quoting Psalm 68. *In Psalm 68, God descended to the earth.* Therefore, Paul is saying that Christ came to earth, not hell (Hodge; Toussaint; see NIV). In other words, in the context of Ephesians 4, Paul is saying Christ ascended to grant gifts, but before He ascended to heaven, He descended to earth. This passage does not support the theory that Christ went to Hades after the crucifixion.

Calvin says, “These words (“into the lower parts of the earth”) mean nothing more than the condition of the present life. To torture them so as to make them mean purgatory or hell, is exceedingly foolish. The argument taken from the comparative degree, ‘the lower parts,’ is quite untenable. A comparison is drawn, not between one part of the earth and another, but between the whole earth and heaven; as if he had said, that from that lofty habitation Christ descended into our deep gulf.”

## **1 Peter 3:19-20**

In 1 Peter 3:18-22, Peter discusses Christ, His death, resurrection, preaching, and ascension. Christ died: “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust that He might bring us to God” (1 Pet. 3:18a). Christ not only died, He arose: “Being put to death in the flesh, but made alive by the Spirit” (1 Pet. 3:18b). Christ preached: “by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah while the Ark was being prepared in which a few, that is, eight souls were saved through water” (1 Pet. 3:19-20). The overall point is plain—Christ preached, but the details are difficult (Selwyn). For example, when did Christ preach? To whom did He preach? What did He preach?

Numerous answers have been given to each of these questions. In an appendix to his commentary, Grudem explains the five most common views. Actually, since ancient times there have been two *basic* interpretations: 1) Christ preached to the spirits in hell between His death and resurrection. 2) Christ preached through Noah to those who, because they rejected that message, are now spirits in prison. Those who hold to the view that Christ preached in hell have various explanations as to whom and what He preached, hence, the five different common views.

*Not Between His Death and Resurrection* Is Peter saying that Christ preached in hell between His death and resurrection? Those who say “Yes” claim that “by whom” (Greek: “in which”) is

related to “in the sphere of the Spirit” (1 Pet. 3:18) and means while Christ was in the spirit before His resurrection, He preached. Some holding this view say He preached to fallen angels because “spirits” alone and without qualification is not used anywhere else in the Bible to describe departed human spirits, but is used for supernatural beings, both good and bad (Selwyn; Grudem calls this the “dominant view today”). Others who hold this view insist that “spirits” refers to people and, therefore, Christ preached to people in hell (Lenski).

The problem with this position is that the passage relates the preaching of Christ to the time of Noah, not the time between the death and resurrection of Christ. A further difficulty is that, even if it is true that Christ preached in Hades between His death and resurrection, why bring that up here?

*In the Days of Noah* Peter is teaching that the pre-incarnate Christ preached through Noah. “By whom” (Greek: “in which”) is related to “in the sphere of the spirit” (1 Pet. 3:18), and it simply means that as Christ rose from the dead with reference to the spirit (that is, He entered a spiritual sphere of life, 1 Pet. 3:18), so “in spirit” He preached (1 Pet. 3:19; Hodges; Wiersbe). Simply put, the pre-incarnate Christ preached through Noah (see “Spirit” in Gen. 6:3 and “Spirit of Christ” in the prophets in 1 Peter 1:11 and “He came and preached” in Eph. 2:17).

*Most Disobeyed* According to this view, “spirits” can either be the people of Noah’s day (Grudem) or fallen angels (Selwyn; Stibbs/Walls). In either case, they were *not* in prison when Christ preached to them through Noah, but they are *now* in prison (see “made proclamation to the spirits *now* in prison” in the NASB). It is natural to refer to people by their present status, even if the time referred to was before that status was acquired. For example, Jacob begat the twelve patriarchs (Acts 7:8). I knew the President when he was in Congress (Hodges). Queen Elizabeth was born in 1926 (Grudem).

Ryrie argues that the spirits are people. He says, “Most likely this is a reference to the pre-incarnate Christ preaching through Noah to those who because they rejected that message are now spirits in prison” (*Ryrie Study Bible*). On the other hand, the argument that the term “spirits,” when used in the New Testament without an article, is a reference to spirit beings, is compelling. It is true that fallen angels are in prison because of their pre-flood disobedience (2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6; Hodges). Hence, Christ in the Spirit preached through Noah to fallen angels who are now in prison.

The point is that the ones to whom Christ preached, disobeyed. They disobeyed the preaching that they heard.

*A Few were Saved* Meanwhile, while the Ark was being prepared, God was being patient. When the Ark was finished, a few, namely eight souls, were saved *through* water. They were not saved *by* water, but, as the Greek text indicates, they were saved *through* water (in the Greek text, the word “saved” has the prefix “through;” see also Stibbs/Walls). Besides, the water did not save them. The Ark did (Hodges).

Peter now applies what he has said to himself and his readers: “There is also an antitype, which now saves us, namely baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God) through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 3:21). The salvation of Noah and his family corresponds to our salvation.

The Greek word translated “antitype” can either mean “type” (copy) or “antitype” (the original). The term is ambiguous (A-G, p. 75). Thus, verse 21 could be translated “to this there is an *antitype*, which also now saves us, namely baptism” or “a *type* of that which now also saves us, namely, baptism”. Either way, the idea is that present-day baptism corresponds to what has gone before in the situation of Noah. Probably “antitype” is preferable. Baptism is the spiritual

reality (the antitype, the original), which was foreshadowed in Noah's day (the type, the copy), that is, "the entire Noahic picture" (Hodges).

What is the meaning of baptism in 1 Peter 3:21? Many commentators interpret baptism here to be water baptism (Selwyn; Barclay; Grudem). The problem with that view is that the water did not save Noah and his family; the Ark did. The Ark is an appropriate figure of Christ into which individuals are placed to be saved. Therefore, baptism in this verse is not water baptism; it is spiritual baptism.

Our spiritual baptism into Christ (the Ark) is now saving us (Hodges; Adams). "God's way of salvation from judgment for sinners is found in the story of the Ark and the flood. The Ark passing safely through the flood provides a figure of God's method of saving man out of inevitable judgment" (Stibbs/Walls). That interpretation fits the context, which is saying that believers are "in Christ" (1 Pet. 3:16; 1 Cor. 12:13; Rom. 6:3) and should, therefore, cease from sin (4:1). It is the baptism of the Spirit that places believers into Christ (Rom. 6:3-5).

Peter adds two appositional clauses that further define and describe the nature of this baptism that is saving us. These two statements "make unmistakably plain that is not the mere participation in the outward form of baptism that saves" (Stibbs/Walls). First, it is not the removal of the filth of the flesh. This baptism is not a physical bath (Hodges).

Second, it is the answer of a good conscience toward God. The word "answer" has been interpreted to mean "question, request, appeal, pledge." Most understand this as either a question asked a new convert (Cranfield) or the pledge made by a new Christian at baptism (Selwyn), but this statement is in contrast ("but") to outward cleansing, which seems to indicate that "answer" means something like "the realization of" a good conscience. There is some evidence that this word means "divine response." It is "the response toward God of a good conscience" (Hodges, who says that the KJV translation "the answer of a good conscience toward God" is substantially correct). It is a "sincere response of the heart to God, and particularly in one's personal confession of faith in Christ crucified and risen" (Stibbs/Walls). It is another way of saying "a request for the forgiveness of sins" (Grudem).

Furthermore, baptism is the response of a good conscience toward God through Christ's resurrection. This is all possible because Christ arose from the dead.

Christ not only arose from the dead, but He is the one "who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and power having been made subject to Him" (1 Pet. 3:22). Having arisen and ascended so that He is at the right hand of the Father, a place of privilege and power (Grudem), Christ exercises dominion over every hostile angelic power.

The point is that because of our relation to Christ, we share His death to sin, we share a life before God, and we enjoy victory over every hostile angelic power (Hodges). What the pre-incarnate Christ did in preaching in the days of Noah is an illustration of what happens to believers. This passage does not teach that Christ went to hades between His crucifixion and resurrection.

## **Luke 16:22-23**

Jesus told of a beggar who died and was carried by angels to Abraham's bosom. "So it was that the beggar died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom" (Lk. 16:22-23). What is Abraham's bosom?

Barnes explains: “This is a phrase taken from the practice of reclining at meals, where the head of one lay on the bosom of another, and the phrase, therefore, denotes intimacy and friendship.... The Jews had no doubt that Abraham was in Paradise. To say that Lazarus was in his bosom was, therefore, the same as to say that he was admitted to heaven and made happy there.” Abraham’s bosom “was used in the Talmud as a figure for heaven” (*MacArthur Study Bible*). It was “a Rabbinical phrase, equivalent to being with Abraham in Paradise” (Vincent). Lange says it is “a metaphorical expression of the blessedness which immediately after death was prepared for pious Israelites in common with their blessed ancestor (John 8:56). In all probability, the expression is synonymous with Paradise, Luke 23:43 (Lightfoot). In Sheol, the general appellation for the abode of departed spirits, the Jews, as is known, distinguish, on the one hand, a place of punishment, Gehenna; on the other hand, Paradise, for the pious.” MacDonald says Abraham’s bosom is “the same as heaven” (see also JFB; Martin in the *Bible Knowledge Commentary*).

### **Acts 2:31**

In Acts 2:31, Peter says the soul of Jesus was not “left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption,” but he is quoting Psalm 16:8-11 (see Acts 2:25-28, esp. verse 27), where Sheol (Hades) means the grave.

### **Matthew 12:40**

In Matthew 12, Jesus said, “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Mt. 12:40). Commentators agree that the expression “heart of the earth” is a figure of speech for the grave.

**Summary:** Between His crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus went to Paradise (heaven), not Hades (hell).