

THE HARROWING OF HELL  
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church  
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I Peter 3:18-22

Sometimes when we think about the almighty power of God, we try to pose a problem that seems to contradict God's power. The old chestnut is: "Is it possible for God to make a rock so heavy that God cannot lift it?" I'm not sure that anyone has ever solved that problem, or that anyone needs to, because it's not very important.

A more important question to ask concerning God's power is this: "Is it possible for a human being to reject God so completely that not even God can redeem that person? Is it possible that I can say No so loudly and so emphatically that it trumps even God's Yes? Is it possible for me or you to live and act in such a way that if we choose, we can completely remove ourselves from the sphere of God's love, and go completely away from God? Is it possible that, if I want to, I can choose to go to the place without God, to go to hell?"

That is a much more important question than the one about making a heavy rock, because this question concerns my salvation and yours. Can I say finally and completely and irrevocably No to God, and therefore consign myself to hell?

In fact, the very existence of hell calls God's power into question. If there is a hell, a place where God is absent, then doesn't that limit the power of God? How can we say that God is almighty if there is a place where God has no power?

What about hell? In our modern world there seem to be two opposing views of hell that are floating around. The first is this: There is no hell. God is love and Jesus is nice, and how could a loving God create us and then put us forever and ever in a place of torment? It doesn't seem fair. It also doesn't seem to agree with our view of God as the loving Father of the prodigal son, or of Jesus the Good Shepherd who hunts for the lost sheep. Would a God like that really send people to hell? So some people say there is no hell.

The other view is just the opposite: There is so a hell, and you'd better shape up or you're going there. There are folks in our world who are enthusiastically in favor of hell and are eager to name a few folks who are on their way there. A poll of Americans a few years ago found that 80% believe they themselves will go to heaven, but that only 60% of their friends will be going there. What is more, the poll found that one in four friends are definitely on their way to hell.<sup>1</sup>

My friend Joanna Adams, a minister in Atlanta, was on the committee that developed a new Brief Statement of Belief for the Presbyterian Church about 20 years ago. I have told you before of her experience on that committee. The committee wrote its first draft of the brief statement and sent it out to the church for comment and response. Joanna said that by far, the line in the statement which got the most response was in the section on human sin. It said: "We deserve God's condemnation." All kinds of responses were sent in fussing about that line. Some even suggested some alternative readings. One said the line should read: "We deserve to be evaluated by God," which makes God sound like a personnel director conducting a performance review. But her favorite, Joanna said, was the person who wrote in and said the line should read, "Some people deserve God's condemnation (and we know who they are!)."

In any event, the heat of hell is a hot topic in our world, and nothing makes some folks madder than to suggest that there is no hell.

The Bible agrees with these folks who insist on hell. The Bible has no doubt that there is a hell. Even Jesus says so. He speaks in his parables of people being cast into the outer darkness, where there is wailing and weeping and gnashing of teeth. He speaks of Gehenna, the place of torment.

There's a cartoon in the New Yorker magazine that shows a line of condemned people standing at the entrance to hell, being prodded down into the sulfurous flames by a devil with a pitchfork. One of those in line says to another, "I hate this part." The Bible hates it, too, but does not hesitate to affirm the existence of hell.

But the Bible affirms one thing about hell that changes everything. Jesus has been there. We say it in that strange little phrase in the Apostles' Creed: "He descended into hell."

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<sup>1</sup> Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, December 10, 1986.

There are several passages in the New Testament that support the idea that Jesus went to hell. But the one that speaks most clearly is the one we read this morning. Let me read the pivotal verses again: “[Christ] was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark. . . .” It is a strange picture: Christ comes and proclaims the gospel to the people who had died during the Noah flood.

You remember the story. In the sixth chapter of Genesis it says: “The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great upon the earth. [And then one of the scariest lines in the Bible] The Lord was sorry that he had made humankind upon the earth.” He was sorry he had made them!

What made him sorry? Maybe it was the same things that grieve God today—the greed, the self-centeredness, the prejudice, the enthusiasm we have for killing each other. Someone has said that hell is “the terrible weariness and incredible boredom of a life focused entirely on itself.”<sup>2</sup> The people who lived in the time of Noah, like so many today, were already in a sort of hell.

So God sent the flood to destroy the work of creation. “God blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the earth, human beings and animals and creeping things and birds of the air; they were blotted out from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those that were with him in the ark.” And now, here they are for all eternity, sitting in the hell of torment, without light, without hope.

Through the ages, let us imagine, they have been joined by others. Over there is old Adam, still puzzling over how eating a stupid apple could have landed him in hell. Nearby is his son Cain, with the blood of his brother Abel still on his hands. Here are Ahab and Jezebel, the king and queen who made a mockery of Israel’s faith; and Manasseh, possibly the worst of all Israel’s kings. And since we’re imagining, we can think of others who are there: Herod, who ordered all babies under two years old to be killed; Torquemada, the mastermind of the Spanish Inquisition; and even a few occupants from our own hellish time: Hitler and Stalin and Cambodia’s Pol Pot.

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, p. 246.

Here they all sit, enduring the isolation, the terrible lovelessness, that is hell. They are there, beyond hope, beyond redemption, beyond the grasp of any good, with only the prospect of existing in this darkness for the rest of eternity.

And then Jesus comes there. He strides into hell. He invades the Devil's den. Because Jesus is so completely opposite—life and light and goodness and love—his presence among them is like a thunderbolt in that place.

There's an old doctrine of the church that calls this moment the Harrowing of Hell—the tormenting of the place of torment, the upsetting of the evil plans of the prince of darkness. If Jesus has been there, how can it quite be hell anymore?

One old dusty commentary on the First Letter of Peter can scarcely contain its excitement at these words: “If there was hope for them, then no one can be beyond the reach of Christ's saving power.”<sup>3</sup> Karl Barth puts it this way: “We are acquitted gratis, *sola gratia*, for God has endured hell for us.”<sup>4</sup> Jesus comes to hell to proclaim the gospel to those who imagined they were beyond hope.

We Presbyterians fret about the old doctrine of Predestination, and get into a lot of silly arguments over it. Here's what Predestination really means: God is determined to have us for God's very own. From all eternity God is set on redeeming us, even at the cost of his Son. During our lives, and even after our lives, God pursues us and woos us. God loves us and will have us back, even if we find ourselves in hell.

If this strange little verse in I Peter it to be believed, there is no one consigned to hell who is absolutely lost—not Judas, nor Pilate, not Hitler or Stalin or Milosevic—not even you or me. There was only one who was totally abandoned to hell, and that one was Jesus. He was abandoned to hell so that no one should ever be lost again. What Paul says in Romans is absolutely to be believed: “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

Perhaps it is true, as has been said, that if people want to go to hell, there needs to be hell for them to go to. The devil is there, however you understand the devil, doing his nefarious work. But now he's nervous, looking over his shoulder all the time. Jesus has descended even to hell, and who knows when he might return?✠

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<sup>3</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *I and II Peter and Jude* (Torch Commentaries), p. 102.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, p. 118.

