

The Gates of Hell Shall Not Prevail

B Y R A L P H C . W O O D

The church's ancient claim is that Christ's victory is not confined to this present life alone. He is also the Judge and Lord over hell. The doctrine of the Harrowing of Hell enables us to affirm that absolutely nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus—neither death nor demonic powers nor even the abyss of hell.

No serious consideration of hell should omit one of the church's most ancient claims in the Apostles Creed—that Christ was not only “crucified, dead, and buried,” but also that he “descended into hell.” As with many other indispensable Christian claims—the Trinity, for example—the doctrine of Christ's descent into hell is a careful theological extrapolation from the biblical narratives. The single slender thread of “evidence” is found in 1 Peter 3:19-20 and 4:6, where we learn that the crucified Christ “went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the day of Noah,” so that “the gospel was preached even to the dead.”

Almost from the beginning, the earliest Christians began to link these claims with many other biblical affirmations. The Psalmist exults in the assurance, for example, that “If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there” (139:8). So do we read in Matthew 16:18 of Christ's remarkable assurance to Peter that his confession of faith (“Thou art the Christ”) will become the foundation stone of the church, and that “the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.” The Old Testament Sheol and the New Testament Hades were understood as the realm of the dead, not yet having been identified with hell as a place of punishment. But since death was the original penalty

for sin in the Garden of Eden, and since the Old Testament characterizes death as the loss of life-giving relationship to God, it seemed obvious for the church to link the realm of the dead with the retribution for evil. Nor was it unreasonable for the church to conclude that the incarnate God was not helplessly non-existent between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. For if death is the final enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26), and if God in Christ has indeed disarmed “the principalities and powers and made a public example

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of them” (Colossians 2:15), then surely on Holy Saturday Jesus broke down the doors of hell.

That Christ crashed the barriers of damnation and harrowed hell is a richly suggestive theological conception. Though largely unknown to modern urbanites, a harrow is a farming

instrument with tines that serve to drag stones from fields. Thus has the church traditionally held that Christ harrowed out of hell those Old Testament saints who are recorded in Hebrews 11 as having lived by a faith that anticipated the coming of Christ. This interpretation of the Roll Call of Saints passage also enabled the church to deal with the thorny problem of the implicit injustice done to all those who would seem to be damned by no other fault than having been born before Christ. The doctrine of Christ’s descent into hell also opens up the possibility of saving faith being given to the unnumbered dead who, even during the Christian era, have never heard the Gospel.

Hell is not a temporal but an eternal realm, the horrible spiritual state of God’s utter absence. Since Christ plunges into hell and preaches to the spirits of the dead, winnowing some of them from hell, it follows that others who have never been given the Good News can still be released from the post-earthly prison of death and damnation. For Christ’s victory is not confined to this present life alone. He is also the Judge and Lord over hell. Thus does the doctrine of the Harrowing of Hell enable us to affirm, with Paul in Romans 8:38-39, that absolutely *nothing* can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus—neither death nor demonic powers nor even the abyss of hell. No one has stated this Pauline hope more clearly than the great Roman Catholic theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar. Exactly in his descent into hell, writes von Balthasar, Christ “disturbs the absolute loneliness striven for by the sinner: the sinner, who wants to be ‘damned’ apart from God, finds God again in his loneliness, but God in the absolute weakness of love ... enters into solidarity with those damning themselves.”¹

A radically different interpretation of Christ's descent into hell has been offered recently by the Presbyterian theologian Alan E. Lewis in a remarkable book, *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday*. He maintains that, if we take seriously the doctrine that Christ assumed our full humanity, then we must retrieve Luther and Calvin's insistence that Christ endured the unfathomable suffering that comes from total abandonment by God in death. Lewis rightly fears that we cheapen Easter if we do not attend to the hellish Sabbath in which God himself lay in the godforsakenness of the grave.

Christ's descent into death reminds us that the Cross was initially a dread defeat, a terrifying invalidation of his claim to have inaugurated a new way, and thus a tragic failure suffered by one who was either deceived or deceiving. If this were indeed his fate, so would it surely be ours: cold putrefaction and final oblivion. Even worse, the silence and emptiness of Holy Saturday signifies the chilling vindication of those who destroy Christ, whether then or now, as a usurper and pretender who cannot deliver on his promise to provide what Lewis calls:

. . . a whole new ordering of life, as intolerable to insurrectionists as to oppressors. It promises that forgiveness, freedom, love, and self-negation, in all their feeble ineffectiveness, will prove more powerful and creative than every system and every countersystem which subdivides the human race into rich and poor, comrades and enemies, insiders and outsiders, allies and adversaries.²

The day of Christ's descent into death and hell, in this reading of it, is the worst

day in history, the Evil Sabbath. It is the day when the play ended, the lights were put out, and all the demonic forces triumphed. Only when we have thus seen what hell really is—not chiefly our own much-deserved punishment, but rather Christ's utterly undeserved defeat—can we begin to celebrate the astonishing surprise of Easter. Rather than abandoning his

Only when we see what hell really is—not chiefly our own much-deserved punishment, but rather Christ's utterly undeserved defeat—can we celebrate the astonishing surprise of Easter. As witnesses to his Resurrection, our Easter freedom is "that the self-promoters who destroy others cannot prove victorious in the end; for the way of life leads only down the path of risky, loving self-expenditure and humble servitude."

crucified Son to Hades (Acts 2:31), the Father raised him. Easter vindicates both Jesus as the second person of the Trinity and also the faith for which he died. As contemporary witnesses to his Resurrection, we too have been liberated from the hell of sin and death. Lewis describes our Easter freedom as the faith “that the self-promoters who destroy others cannot prove victorious in the end; for the way of life leads only down the path of risky, loving self-expenditure and humble servitude.”³

Whether we read Christ’s descent into hell as a triumph or a defeat, it remains a crucial concern for all Christians. With his usual crispness and clarity, G. K. Chesterton sums up the enormous significance of the doctrine: “Christ descended into hell; Satan fell into it. One wanted to go up and went down; the other wanted to go down and went up. A god can be humble, a devil can only be humbled.”⁴

NOTES

1 *The von Balthasar Reader*, edited by Medard Kehl and Werner Loser (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997), 153.

2 Alan E. Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), 49.

3 *Ibid.*, 64.

4 G. K. Chesterton, *The Ball and the Cross* (London: Wells Gardner, Darton & Co., 1910), 279.



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