

The Harrowing of Hell: What Jesus Did in the Dark

By System Import | Sermon | March 13, 2026

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(Duration: Approx. 25–30 Minutes)

Introduction: The Deafening Silence of Saturday

We talk endlessly about Good Friday. We weep over the cross, the nails, and the blood. We celebrate Easter Sunday with trumpets, lilies, and shouts of "He is Risen!" But there is a day in between that we rarely discuss. It is Holy Saturday. The day of silence. The day Jesus' body lay cold in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.

But while His body was resting in the tomb, where was His Spirit? Was He simply "asleep"? Was He floating in a void? The Apostles' Creed, recited by believers for centuries, includes a line that makes many of us uncomfortable: *"He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell."*

Why? Why did the Holy Son of God have to descend into the darkest place in the universe? Did He go there to suffer more? Did He go there to fight? Did He go there to rescue someone?

This is one of the most mysterious and victorious chapters in the entire Bible. Theologians call it the "Harrowing of Hell." It wasn't a defeat; it was an invasion. Jesus didn't go to hell as a victim; He went as a Conqueror. He didn't go to serve a sentence; He went to serve an eviction notice.

Today, we are going to grab a flashlight and descend into the mystery of those three days. We are going to look at the "Geography of the Underworld," the "Keys of Death," and the "Great Jailbreak." We are going to discover that the greatest battle wasn't fought on the earth, but **under** it.

Number 1: Understanding the Destination — Sheol vs. Gehenna

To understand why Jesus went down, we have to understand where "down" actually is. In the English Bible, we often see the word "Hell" used for everything. But the original languages make a critical distinction.

* Gehenna (The Lake of Fire): This is the place of final judgment and eternal punishment. This is where Satan will ultimately be cast. Jesus did not go here. No one is there yet.

* Sheol (Hebrew) / Hades (Greek): This was the "Abode of the Dead." Before the resurrection of Christ, **everyone** who died went to Sheol. It was a temporary holding place.

But Jesus reveals in Luke 16 (The Rich Man and Lazarus) that Sheol had two compartments. It was divided by a "Great Gulf."

1. Torment: Where the unrighteous waited.

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2. Abraham's Bosom (Paradise): Where the righteous (like Abraham, Moses, David) waited in comfort.

Why were the righteous in a holding tank? Why weren't they in Heaven? Because the blood of bulls and goats could cover sin, but it couldn't *remove* sin (Hebrews 10:4). The debt hadn't been fully paid yet. The door to the Throne Room was still shut. They were saved, but they were "on hold," waiting for the Messiah to open the gate. Jesus had to go to Sheol because that's where His friends were.

Number 2: The "It Is Finished" Reality — He Did Not Go to Suffer

There is a dangerous misconception that Jesus went to hell to be tortured by demons for three days to "finish" the payment for sin. This is false.

On the Cross, Jesus' final words were, "It is finished" (John 19:30). The Greek word is **Tetelestai** —paid in full. The wrath of God was satisfied on the Cross, not in hell.

Jesus didn't descend as a prisoner of war; He descended as the Special Forces Commander. Colossians 2:15 paints the picture: *"And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross."*

In ancient Rome, when a General won a war, he would have a "Triumph" parade. He would drag the defeated kings behind his chariot, stripped of their armor, to show everyone they had lost. Jesus went down to strip the enemy of his authority. He walked right into Satan's headquarters, not to be tormented, but to display His victory. He went to show the powers of darkness that their greatest weapon—Death—had just been broken.

Number 3: The Seizure of the Keys (Revelation 1:18)

In Revelation 1:18, the Risen Jesus appears to John and makes a stunning declaration: *"I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades."*

How did He get those keys? He took them.

For thousands of years, Satan held the power of death (Hebrews 2:14). He was the jailer. Every time a human died, Satan could claim legal authority over them because of sin. He held the keys that locked the gates of the grave from the inside.

When Jesus died, He entered the jail. But because He had no sin, death couldn't hold Him (Acts 2:24). It was illegal for the grave to keep a sinless man. The system crashed. Jesus turned the tables on the jailer. He wrestled the keys from the enemy's hand.

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Possessing keys means possessing Authority.

* Because He holds the keys, Satan can no longer determine when you die; only Jesus can.

* Because He holds the keys, the grave is no longer a prison for the believer; it is a passageway. He had to go down to transfer the administration of death from the Devil to Himself.

Number 4: The Great Jailbreak (Ephesians 4:8)

This is perhaps the most beautiful reason for His descent. Ephesians 4:8 says: *"When he ascended on high, he took many captives..."*

Who were these captives? They were the Old Testament saints waiting in "Abraham's Bosom."

Imagine Adam, Eve, Noah, Abraham, David, and Isaiah sitting in the comfort of Sheol, waiting for thousands of years. They had the promise, but they hadn't seen the fulfillment. They were waiting for the Seed of the Woman to crush the Serpent's head.

Suddenly, on that Holy Saturday, a light pierces the darkness of the underworld. The door swings open. And there stands the Messiah, holding the keys.

He says to them, "The debt is paid. The road to the Father is paved with My blood. Pack your bags. We are leaving this place."

Jesus emptied the "Paradise" section of Hades. He moved Paradise from the basement to the penthouse (2 Corinthians 12:2).

He had to go down to get them. He wasn't going to leave His faithful servants in the waiting room a moment longer than necessary. He led "captivity captive."

Number 5: The Proclamation to the Spirits (1 Peter 3:19)

1 Peter 3:19 adds another mysterious layer: *"He went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits..."*

Who are these spirits? Most theologians believe these are the fallen angels from the days of Noah (Genesis 6), who were bound in chains of darkness.

Jesus didn't preach the Gospel to them to save them (angels cannot be saved). He went to Proclaim His victory. The word used is **kerygso** (to herald), not **euangelizo** (to evangelize).

He went to the deepest dungeons of the demonic realm to make an announcement: "You thought you won by killing Me. You thought you could stop the Seed of the Woman. But you failed. I have won. Your doom is sealed."

It was a cosmic victory lap. Even the darkest demons had to bow and acknowledge that He is Lord. He had to go down to ensure that **every** knee would bow—not just in heaven and on earth,

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but "under the earth" (Philippians 2:10).

Number 6: The Sign of Jonah (Matthew 12:40)

Jesus predicted this journey in Matthew 12:40: *"For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."*

Jonah was swallowed by death. He went down to the "roots of the mountains" (Jonah 2:6). But the fish couldn't digest him. It had to vomit him out.

Jesus had to go into the "heart of the earth" to fulfill the prophecy. The earth swallowed the Creator, but it got a bad case of indigestion. It couldn't consume Him.

This 3-day period was the legal timeframe to prove He was truly dead. In Jewish tradition, the spirit was believed to hover near the body for three days. By staying down for three full days, Jesus proved that His resurrection wasn't a resuscitation or a coma recovery. It was a total conquest of death itself.

Number 7: Why It Matters For You — The Fear of Death is Gone

Why does this matter to you today? Why should you care about what happened 2,000 years ago in the underworld?

Because you don't have to go there.

Before Christ, death was a terrifying one-way trip into the gloom of Sheol. But because Jesus went there and ripped the doors off the hinges, the destination for the believer has changed.

We do not go to Hades. We do not go to a holding tank.

Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:8, *"To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord."*

When a Christian dies, they bypass the underworld entirely. They go straight to the Throne.

Jesus went through the horror of the darkness so you could walk straight into the light. He took the "elevator" down to the basement so He could bring you up to the penthouse.

He faced the cold isolation of death so that you could say, *"Where, O death, is your victory?*

Where, O death, is your sting?" (1 Corinthians 15:55).

Conclusion

The descent of Jesus was not a tragedy; it was a rescue mission.

He invaded the enemy's territory.

He disarmed the demonic powers.

He seized the keys of authority.

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He liberated the waiting saints.

And He paved the highway to Heaven.

So, when you think of Jesus, don't just picture Him on the Cross, and don't just picture Him standing by the empty tomb. Picture Him in the dark, kicking down the gates of hell, looking at the enemy, and saying, "Give Me those keys. I'll take it from here."

You serve a Savior who has conquered the grave from the inside out. Be fearless today.