

The Magnificent Story: HOLY SATURDAY

By Senior Pastor Tom Harrison

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I have never preached on the topic of “Holy Saturday” but I’m so glad Jim included it in his book (we cover chapter 7 this week). The President of Asbury Theological Seminary, Dr. Tim Tennent (who will speak at Asbury on November 21), wrote a book of meditations on the Apostles’ Creed called “This We Believe.” He writes, “The early Church did not understand the death of Christ on Friday and His resurrection on Sunday as two separate events (as they are often understood and thought of by modern Christians). Rather, they understood the entire drama to unfold as one continuous event. For most Christians, Good Friday and Easter Sunday have great meaning, but we are not so sure how these events are connected by Holy Saturday.” We spend time this week looking at 1 Peter 3:18-22 and the description of Jesus’ descent and proclamation “to the spirits in prison.” There is a reason I have never preached on this text—it is VERY complicated and strange. So, when you hear the sermon, grant some extra grace in its delivery. (In fact, you could extend that grace every Sunday.)

1 Peter 3:18-22 (Pew Bible pg. 1205)

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit,¹⁹ in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison,²⁰ because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water.²¹ Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

I think this is the most difficult passage in the New Testament to interpret. There are a number of different ways to explain it. Here are some of the questions. **WHO** did Jesus preach to? Were they Noah’s contemporaries? Were the “spirits” people or evil spirits? **WHAT** did He preach to them? Did He give them a 2nd chance or was it more of an announcement that He was King? **WHERE** did He go? Is there a difference between Hades and Hell (temporary place vs. permanent place)?

Martin Luther: *A wonderful text is this, and a more obscure passage perhaps than any other in the NT, so that I do not know for a certainty just what Peter means.*” Let’s not be overconfident. Paul said, “Now we see into a mirror dimly; then we shall know fully.” As A.B. Steen said, “I get in trouble when I tell more than I know.” Right now, there are many things we do not understand. However, here is what we know.

Jesus had 3 “Self-Emptying” Acts of Love (“Kenosis”)

- 1.) **Incarnation:** emptying = Christmas
- 2.) **Good Friday:** coronation = crucifixion Jesus suffered and died – was unjust, unfair. He did not deserve it. He became the sacrifice for our sins, replacing the Old Testament sacrificial system. He was righteous – we are unrighteous. The purpose? To bring us to God. He was on a rescue mission.
- 3.) **Holy Saturday:** descent He died. He was dead. After the crucifixion, on “Good Friday,” *Jesus went and proclaimed to the spirits.* To quote our granddaughter, Lonnie, when she played Old Maid and would beam when she’d get the old maid and then say, “*Somebody got somebody.*” Jesus went somewhere and said something to somebody at some time. Was in in the days of Noah or was it on holy Saturday? Who He spoke to, what He said, and what happened is subject to debate. We’ll not resolve it. There are some things that we just do not know or understand. This is an “**off stage**” event.

The Magnificent Story p117 “*Holy Saturday has been almost completely overlooked in the church. Saturday is not a day we commemorate what Jesus did for us but has been turned into a day we spend preparing for Easter. What happened on Holy Saturday? According to the Bible and the early church, he “descended into hell.” The Apostles’ Creed is a summation of what Christians believe that first appeared in AD 390. It tells the magnificent story using short clauses, such as “he was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary.” One overlooked clause is “he (Jesus) descended into hell.” I’ve asked many Christians if they have heard this clause, and they admit to saying it. But when I ask if they know what it means, the response is nearly always, “No, I have never even thought about it.” It is telling us something important about the story. In his descent, Jesus experienced extreme separation and alienation from God the Father. In his abandonment, he redeemed our times of abandonment. We need to understand it because it provides an answer to the problem of **theodicy** raised earlier.” **“Theodicy” = why does God allow evil and suffering?** Jim asked that question when their daughter died of a rare disease.*

Anastasis (Uh-ness-tuh-sis") **Icon**. "Ana" = "up" or "again" and "statis" = "to stand") - this is so much more than our minds can grasp. "*Now we see into a mirror dimly.*" Read page 117

However we interpret this text, 3 points of application:

1.) **Descents are real.** Probably 1/3 of the Psalms are Psalms of lament. There's even a book in the Bible with that name: Lamentations. And of course, there's the book about Job who lost his business, his livestock, his family, and his health and he never got any answers.

The ultimate descent is death. In talking with someone who lost a spouse, they described their experience over the past months with these words: "*Abandonment. Nobody cares. I feel I've no value to anyone – I feel worthless. Nothing to live for. I don't care about anything. Everything is dark. The darkness feels like a living death. It's like fighting the devil every day. I understand why people think about suicide – especially older people. I'm no longer part of a couple – I must make a new set of friends. I have to force myself to call people – even my kids. I've lost a lot of weight. Platitudes hurt.*" But this man told me recently he's "back." He said "*My devotional life kept me alive. I have to work at setting goals and doing the right things. He's also started back to the gym. He said when he was a kid his mom told him to go to school even when he didn't feel great. She didn't coddle him. She taught him not to wait on his feelings, but to take action. Just do it. Stats say that loneliness is causing more deaths now than obesity.*" In addition to death, there are other forms of descent that are physical, mental, emotional, financial, and relational health.

2.) **There's no God-forsaken place.** God can go anywhere. Even to the gates of hell. We may not know what he did there, but we know He went and He returned. He has power overall.

3.) **Jesus is victorious over death/Hades.** He preached good news of God's victory and judgment.

Jim Stovall has been completely blind for over 40 years, but this Tulsa treasure is a world-renowned novelist. Steve Forbes said, "*Jim is one of the most extraordinary men of our era.*" Our folks loved having him speak at Asbury. Though Jim cannot see, he has great perception. I had the opportunity to visit his home. He shared some of his thoughts. "*We need three things to be happy: We must have something to do, someone to love, and something to look forward to. You can be happy if you are blind, broke, burned-out or anything else, and you can be a billionaire and have everything in the world, but still be miserable. It doesn't work if you don't have these three things. Now, if you follow Jesus, you only need one of these things—He is someone to love. Because if you follow Christ, you have someone to love but you also have something to do and something to look forward to.*" Jim believes when we find God's love in Jesus, we find someone who completely loves, accepts, and forgives us. We also get to respond to God's love by loving Him in return.

Colossians 1:13-14 is what Jim is describing: "***He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.***"

We'll close this message by uniting in this historic confession of the Christian faith with the addition of the one line, "*He descended into hell.*"