DAVID V. LOTT, PH.D. | TEACHING RESOURCE

BETWEEN THE CROSS AND THE RESURRECTION

Understanding the Three Days Between Jesus' Death and Resurrection

A 60-Minute Teaching Study for Adult Bible Study and Discipleship

BIG IDEA

The New Testament gives us several important statements about the period between Jesus' death and resurrection, but it does not provide a continuous hour-by-hour narrative. A careful study distinguishes what Scripture clearly states from later theological constructions, then places the emphasis where the apostles place it: Christ truly died, was buried, rose bodily from the dead, and through His death and resurrection defeated Sin and Death.

Teaching Goals

- Establish what the New Testament explicitly says happened between Jesus' death and resurrection.
- Examine the principal texts commonly used in discussions of Christ's descent, Paradise, Hades, proclamation to the spirits, and the dead.
- Distinguish biblical statements from later interpretations and creedal formulations.
- Show why the theological center is not speculation about the intermediate period, but the completed death, burial, and bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Key Biblical Texts

Luke 23:39–43	**Matthew 12:38–40**	**Matthew 27:50–53**
Acts 2:22–32	**Ephesians 4:7–10**	**1 Peter 3:18–20**
1 Peter 4:6	**Romans 6:8–10**	**1 Corinthians 15:3–8**

Lesson Roadmap

1. Friday: Jesus Truly Dies
2. The Body in the Tomb
3. "Today You Shall Be with Me in Paradise"
4. Did Christ Descend to Hades?
5. The Difficult Text: 1 Peter 3:18–20
6. What Can We Say with Confidence?
7. Sunday: Bodily Resurrection and Victory

1. Friday: Jesus Truly Dies

Any study of the period between the cross and resurrection must begin with the reality of Jesus' death. The Gospels do not present Him as merely unconscious or near death. Jesus yields up His spirit; the soldiers confirm that He is already dead; His side is pierced; and His body is released for burial. Christian resurrection faith depends upon a real death followed by a real resurrection.

The apostolic summary is deliberately simple: Christ died for our sins, He was buried, He was raised on the third day, and He appeared to witnesses (1 Corinthians 15:3–8). Those four movements provide the safest framework for everything else in this lesson.

2. The Body in the Tomb

Joseph of Arimathea receives Jesus' body, wraps it, and places it in a tomb. The burial matters. It publicly locates Jesus among the dead and establishes continuity between the body that died and the body that was raised. Resurrection in the New Testament is not the survival of an idea or merely the continuation of the soul; it is the raising of the crucified Jesus.

Matthew 12:40 uses the language of the Son of Man being "in the heart of the earth." This text has played a major role in later discussions of Christ's descent. At minimum, it unmistakably associates Jesus with the realm of death. We should be cautious about forcing the phrase to answer questions it was not intended to answer.

3. "Today You Shall Be with Me in Paradise"

One of the clearest sayings from the cross is Jesus' promise to the repentant criminal: "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). Whatever additional questions remain, Jesus speaks of conscious fellowship with Him beyond death. The statement also reminds us that the intermediate state is not the final Christian hope. Paradise after death precedes the bodily resurrection that the New Testament places at the center of future hope.

The lesson should therefore distinguish the intermediate state from resurrection. At death, the believer is with Christ; at resurrection, the believer is raised bodily. The latter is the consummation toward which the New Testament points.

4. Did Christ Descend to Hades?

Acts 2:22–32 applies Psalm 16 to Jesus and speaks of Him not being abandoned to Hades and His flesh not undergoing decay. The passage clearly places Jesus within the reality of death and declares that death could not hold Him. Its primary emphasis is resurrection.

Ephesians 4:7–10 speaks of Christ descending into "the lower parts of the earth" before ascending above all the heavens. Interpreters have understood this in several ways: His incarnation, His burial, or a descent to the realm of the dead. The passage should be acknowledged as relevant, but it does not by itself settle the question.

Later Christian tradition summarized Christ's victory with language such as "He descended to the dead" or, in some English forms of the Apostles' Creed, "He descended into hell." The creed is historically important, but it must not be allowed to supply details that the biblical text itself does not give.

5. The Difficult Text: 1 Peter 3:18–20

First Peter 3:18–20 is the most debated passage in this discussion. Peter says that Christ was put to death in the flesh, made alive in the spirit, and in that state went and made proclamation to "the spirits now in prison," who had been disobedient in the days of Noah.

Several major interpretations have been proposed. Some understand Christ to have proclaimed victory to imprisoned spiritual beings. Others understand a proclamation to the human dead. Still others understand Christ, through the Spirit, to have preached through Noah to Noah's generation. The grammar, background, and identity of the "spirits" have produced centuries of debate.

For teaching purposes, the most responsible conclusion is not to pretend that a difficult text is simple. Peter's central theological movement is clear even where the details are disputed: Christ suffered once for sins, was vindicated, and now reigns with angels, authorities, and powers subjected to Him (1 Peter 3:18, 22). The destination of the passage is victory.

6. What About 1 Peter 4:6?

First Peter 4:6 says that "the gospel has for this purpose been preached even to those who are dead." This has sometimes been read as evidence of postmortem evangelism. Another common interpretation is that the people were evangelized while alive but had since died. The verse is too compressed to carry an elaborate doctrine of a second opportunity after death, especially when read alongside the New Testament's broader teaching on judgment.

This is a useful example of sound interpretive method: unclear passages should not be made to overturn clear and repeated teaching.

7. What Can We Say with Confidence?

We Can Affirm Confidently	We Should Hold More Cautiously
• Jesus truly died and was buried.	• A detailed geography of the realm of the dead.
• His body remained in the tomb until the resurrection.	• An exact itinerary of Christ's activity during every part of the three-day period.
• Jesus promised the repentant criminal fellowship with Him in Paradise.	• The precise identity of the "spirits in prison" in 1 Peter 3.
• The New Testament speaks of Jesus in relation to Hades/death and declares that He was not abandoned there.	• Claims that Christ suffered further punishment after the cross.
• Christ was bodily raised and publicly vindicated.	• Claims of a universal postmortem opportunity for salvation.
• His death and resurrection constitute victory over Death and the powers.	

A Crucial Theological Guardrail: The Cross Was Sufficient

Jesus' final declaration, "It is finished," must govern the discussion. Whatever one concludes about the disputed descent passages, the New Testament does not require us to imagine that Jesus continued suffering for sin after His death. His sacrificial work was accomplished at the cross. The period between death and resurrection is not an unfinished phase of atonement.

The resurrection is God's vindication of the crucified Son and the decisive manifestation of victory. Christ does not rise in order to finish paying for sin; He rises because the work of redemption has been accomplished and Death cannot hold Him.

8. Sunday: Bodily Resurrection and Victory

The Gospels move quickly from the silence of the tomb to the discovery that the tomb is empty. The same Jesus who was crucified has risen. His resurrection body is transformed and glorified, yet continuous with the body that was buried. He speaks, eats, can be touched, and bears the marks of crucifixion.

Paul therefore treats resurrection as indispensable to the gospel. If Christ has not been raised, faith is futile; but Christ has been raised, the first fruits of those who are asleep (1 Corinthians 15:17, 20). The three-day story ends not with speculation about the underworld, but with the conquest of Death.

Class Discussion

1. Why is the actual death and burial of Jesus essential to Christian resurrection faith?
2. What does Jesus' promise of Paradise teach us, and what does it not tell us?
3. Why should we distinguish the intermediate state from bodily resurrection?
4. Which conclusions about Christ's descent are explicit in Scripture, and which depend upon interpretation?
5. How should we teach 1 Peter 3:18–20 without pretending the interpretive difficulties do not exist?
6. Why is it important to reject the idea that Christ continued paying for sin after saying, "It is finished"?
7. How does the resurrection change the focus of the entire discussion?

Closing Summary

THE CENTER OF THE STUDY

Between the cross and resurrection, Scripture gives us glimpses rather than a complete travelogue. We should say everything the text says and resist the temptation to say what it does not say. The apostolic proclamation remains wonderfully clear: Christ died for our sins, He was buried, He was raised, and He lives. The crucified One has defeated Death.

Teacher's Companion

Suggested 60-minute pacing:

- 5 minutes - Introduction: what do we actually know?
- 10 minutes - Death, burial, and Paradise
- 12 minutes - Hades, Ephesians 4, and the descent tradition

- 15 minutes - 1 Peter 3:18–20 and 1 Peter 4:6
- 8 minutes - The sufficiency of the cross
- 10 minutes - Resurrection, discussion, and closing

Teacher Guardrails

- Distinguish biblical statements from later creedal or theological constructions.
- Do not build certainty on 1 Peter 3 where responsible interpreters disagree.
- Do not teach that Jesus suffered additional punishment in hell after the cross.
- Do not let discussion of the intermediate state eclipse bodily resurrection.
- Keep the lesson's climax where the New Testament keeps it: the risen Christ and the defeat of Death.

For Further Study

This study connects naturally with David V. Lott's teaching on the sufficiency of Christ and with the broader biblical theme of Death as a defeated enemy. The cross is complete; the tomb is temporary; resurrection is the victory.