

# Death Cannot Hold Him

*Christian Liberty*

By Bob Vincent

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**Bible Text:** Acts 2:22-28; Psalm 16:8-11  
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**Trinity Presbyterian Church**  
2623 N Robison Road  
Texarkana, TX 75501

**Website:** [www.rbvincent.com](http://www.rbvincent.com)  
**Online Sermons:** [www.sermonaudio.com/rbvincent](http://www.sermonaudio.com/rbvincent)

Our lesson today is taken from Acts 2, and I'll begin reading at verse 22.

22 'Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. 23 This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. 24 But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. 25 David said about him: "I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. 26 Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will live in hope, 27 because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay. 28 You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.'

The word of the Lord.

May we pray.

*Lord, help me in my weakness and frailty, of body and mind, by the power of the Holy Spirit animating my spirit, to open up the text of scripture, that we may understand things in a very clear and compelling way, and that the anointing of the Spirit of God would be in this whole place. Lord, as you did on Pentecost, when the Spirit was poured out and filled the room where the disciples were, so fill this place. For the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.*

I've entitled this sermon "Death Cannot Keep Its Prey," and you may recall that was a phrase in the hymn that we just sang, "Up from the Grave He Arose." I want you to look at some verses here. Look at verse 24, Acts 2:24, "But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death." Death here is described using the figure of a woman giving birth. I was present at the birth of four of my five children—my middle daughter was too fast for me—and present at the birth of one of my grandson's mother. No, I was present when you were born, Wilder, in the room along with Momsie, but I stood behind the bed in front of the doctor.

So birth is described as an agony, as birth pangs, something that I've never experienced, and I don't want to experience. I think if men got pregnant, things would be different. But anyhow. So death is here described in verse 24 as an agony, as a birthing process.

And then he says, "because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him." That's an interesting thing. "Death to keep its hold on him."

Let's look down a little further and notice here in verse 27, "because you will not abandon me to the grave." Now it's interesting, in the Apostles' Creed, we say that Christ descended into hell. Is that true? Yes and no.

Here's what it means. You will not abandon me to the grave, that is a quote from the 16<sup>th</sup> Psalm, and we might want to hold our hands there and turn back to Psalm 16 for just a moment because it's very illustrative of what Peter is saying in his Pentecost day sermon.

So Psalm 16 and page 854, and he says in verse 9, it's a Psalm of David, but it's ultimately about Christ. He says, verse 9,

"Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure." Verse 10, "because you will not abandon me to the grave."

Now the word that's translated "grave" there, if you look at the bottom of the page, is the Hebrew word "Sheol." Sheol. Sheol (she'ol, שְׁאוֹל) means a variety of things. In a strictly physical and literal way, it's speaking about the grave.

Remember that Christ was not buried. Remember that Christ was laid in a carved-out tomb, and he was laid on a slab Friday afternoon, the first day. And so he's saying "You will not abandon me to the grave," but really, if we understand the mind of the Hebrew people, Sheol is something else, and that's what we say in the Apostles' Creed, he descended into Sheol. That's what we mean.

And he says there that the Greek translation of that word is the word from which we get the word "Hades." Hades. Hades (hadēs, ᾍδης) refers to the place where the dead, righteous and unrighteous, went.

And so, in the Old Testament you discover that Hades (ᾍδης) or Sheol (לִּיאֵץ) was a place with two compartments and people could see one another. That's why when Jesus told the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, he said that Lazarus is seated at the place of honor next to Abraham, who was the greatest of all the Jewish people, because he's the father of the Jewish race, and there is Lazarus, the poor beggar, and he is lying in the bosom, that is, as people would recline at a meal, Jesus is describing Lazarus as being the person who is lying in the place of honor at this banquet in hell (Luke 16:23).

You see, really it doesn't sound right to say it that way.

Lying at the place of honor in (Sheol, לִּיאֵץ/Hades, ᾍδης) because Sheol has a place called Paradise, and it also has a place for the wicked dead. And where do you think the rich guy with all that money and power went? He went to the bad part of Sheol, and he is there experiencing—not in his body—but it seemed like his body, because the psychological torments he's experiencing causes him to cry out across the great chasm that separates the righteous dead and the unrighteous dead, "Father Abraham, please send Lazarus to dip his finger in the water and cool my tongue because I'm tormented in this flame!" (Luke 16:24)

It's not a place of literal flames. It's a place of the torment of the soul for the unrighteous dead. And so here you see Jesus descends into (Sheol, לִּיאֵץ/Hades, ᾍδης). He descends into Sheol, the place of the righteous dead.

That's why he could say to the thief on the cross, as he says to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Luke 23:42), Jesus said, "Today you will be with me in Paradise." (Luke 23:43) Paradise

(παράδεισος) is the part of Sheol where the righteous dead went until the resurrection of Christ.

So as we look here, we see other things. He says in verse 10, “You will not abandon me to Sheol, nor will you allow your Holy One to see decay.”

In Hebrew, the word means the pit, the pit, like a dark pit, like a bottomless pit (תַּבַּיִת). But the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament has it as “corruption (διαφθορά).”

So, turning again, we see something back in Acts 2 and you see in verse 27, page 1,693, Acts 2.27,

“You will not abandon me to Sheol, to Hades, nor will you allow your Holy One to see decay.”

He said, “You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.” Now I want to say something else here. It’s interesting as we look back up at verse 24 where he speaks of the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him, it’s interesting if we look at other passages of scripture such as Psalm 116. We might want to flip over there for a moment.

Psalm 116 and look at what he says, the psalmist says. And by the way, Psalm 116 is part of the hymn that Jesus and his disciples sang on Maundy Thursday. It said, after they had had communion, they sang a hymn, well, that hymn is here. And he speaks here of fighting with death, and he says in verse 3, Psalm 116:3, page 955,

“The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of Sheol, Hades, came upon me; I was overcome by trouble and sorrow. Then I called on the name of the LORD: ‘O LORD, save me!’” The cords of death. (לְקַח,

I want you to understand something that happened Friday afternoon in the year A.D. 30. When Jesus’ body is laid on that stone slab, death threw its rope around Jesus just like somebody lassoing a calf. Does anybody over there know about lassoing objects? And death lassoed Jesus. His body remained right there in the stone tomb.

But death lassoed him (אַפְפָּוְנֵי הַבְּלִי-מָוֶת). It wrapped its ropes around him, its cords around him, and it pulled him down to the abode of the dead. That's quite an illustration, isn't it?

Death is described as both a birthing process, an agony, and it's described as being lassoed by a terrible enemy and being pulled down into that pit, into that place that is the abode of both the righteous and the unrighteous dead.

And so, what I want us also to understand is that when we say in the Apostles' Creed, he descended into hell, we're thinking of (Sheol, אַוֶּשֶׁת/Hades, ᾗδης) of the Old Testament. We're not thinking of hell.

What is hell? Well, if you turn with me back to the gospel of Mark 9, Mark 9, we see something here. Mark 9 and beginning at verse 43 and that is on page 1,569. Listen to what he says, page 1,569, and starting at verse 42. This is the Lord Jesus speaking,

“If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out,” he says.

Now think about it for a moment. Is this a metaphor? I think not. If we really understand what the Bible teaches about life after death, for those who lived before Christ's resurrection, Sheol, Hades, the place of both the righteous and the unrighteous dead, but there's coming a time when those who are in Sheol will end up going somewhere else. I'm speaking **now of the unrighteous dead**. They will go to a place, and the Greek word here is Gehenna. Gehenna (géenna, γέεννα). They will go to hell.

What is hell? This is important. Jesus did not go to hell. He did not go to Gehenna. He went to Hades. Listen to how Jesus himself describes it. He describes it as a place where the fire never goes out. Then he says in verse 45,

“And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell.” Into Gehenna, which is literally the lake of fire. “And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two

eyes and be thrown into Gehenna, where ‘their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.’”

Let’s think about that for a moment. What is the difference between Hades and Gehenna? Hades is the place where all the dead went prior to the resurrection of Christ. The righteous, like Lazarus and Abraham, and the unrighteous, like the rich man, they went there, and Jesus went there. He was lassoed by death and pulled down into Hades, into Sheol. But notice how he describes another part. That’s Gehenna.

It’s called the lake of fire. Notice he describes it as a place “Where their worm does not die, and their fire is not quenched.” Wow! What’s that like? What’s it like? What is he describing? What is Jesus describing here in this place as he describes this final abode of those who don’t know God? He describes it as Gehenna. What is Gehenna?

When you were a criminal in Jerusalem, you did not get buried. What happened? You were thrown over the wall into a place where no one was buried. And in that place, garbage was burned. And what do you notice about a garbage dump? It’s always a place where worms are because they throw rotten meat and other rotten food and vegetables there, and the fire’s always burning, and the worms are always eating. You see how Jesus describes Gehenna here? He describes Gehenna as a place where it never ends.

It’s like the garbage dump outside Jerusalem—the worm always devouring. Think of it. Think of yourself as a criminal who is cast over into the garbage pit, the Valley of the sons of Hinnom (גֵּי בְנֵי-הִינּוֹם). Think about it. Think if you had not actually died but simply been knocked out, and you come to, and you discover that worms are beginning to eat your body, and you discover that your hand is lying in coals of fire.

That’s how Jesus describes it. And when you understand that, that’s why Jesus uses this picture. He says if your right hand offends you, if you can’t do anything else but keep on sinning with your right hand, you better chop it off. It’s better to chop your right hand off than for your whole body—notice it’s a place of **physical torment** and not just of the soul—to be cast into Gehenna where the fire never goes out and where the worm never dies. Wow. It’s worth losing a right hand. It’s worth losing a right foot. It’s worth losing an eye to stay out of there.

Turn with me lastly to Revelation 14. Revelation 14 and that's on page 1,928, page 1,928, Revelation 14. Listen to how Jesus, through the Apostle John, describes the last place of the wicked dead. He says here in verse 8,

“A second angel followed and said, ‘Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great, which made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries.’ A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: ‘If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God’s fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name.’”

Let’s think about these things together for just a moment. Easter Sunday is so important. Jesus went to hell so you and I would never go to hell. What do I mean?

Jesus went to Hades, Jesus went to Sheol, so that you and I would never go to Gehenna, because here is the fate of all those who do not swear allegiance to Jesus but swear allegiance to anybody else. It is a place of burning sulfur. It is a place in verse 11 where “the smoke of their torment rises **forever and ever.**” It is a place where there is “**no rest.**”

Wow! Jesus went to Sheol, Hades, so you and I would not have to go to Gehenna.

Whatever you’ve got to do to avoid going to Gehenna, I swear before Almighty God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, it’s worth doing. It’s worth doing because many people whom you know in a casual way at work, in a family, neighbors, many people you know, including the powerful people, the rulers of our world, many of them—not all of them—many of them are going to end up there.

But this is the beautiful thing about Easter: Easter came so that you and I, and a multitude that no one can number of every nation, tribe, and tongue, would escape Gehenna and would be with Jesus, not simply in Paradise or Sheol, but in heaven itself. What a wonderful thing!

Now I have to note one thing in closing, and that is that Peter's sermon is on the day of Pentecost. This is what we have to understand: What is the proof that Jesus rose from the dead? Well, we could cite many evidences, including all of the tortures that the first disciples and eyewitnesses of Jesus went through. Never did the leaders ever ask any disciple, "Where's his body?" They knew he had risen from the dead. They just couldn't accept the fact that it had happened by the power of God. They thought maybe it was a magic trick, maybe one of the Roman gods had done this, or maybe some other weird thing had happened. Never were the disciples ever questioned where's his body because they knew his body was not on earth. They were tortured plenty and put to death. Never did they ask, "Where's the body."

But what is the great proof? Well, we know that in the gospels and in 1 Corinthians 15, Jesus appeared at one time to over 500 people who were still alive when Paul wrote 1 Corinthians (1 Corinthians 15:6). What is the great evidence?

"You ask me how I know he lives. He lives in my heart." There's this profound connection between Easter Sunday and Pentecost Sunday. Easter Sunday and Pentecost Sunday because what? Jesus walked the earth for 40 days. He ate fish. He ate bread. He let his disciples touch him. They handled him (1 John 1:1). They were able to put their fingers where the nails had been in his hand, probably right here, and put their hand right there where the spear had thrust into his side, and out came the water and the blood. So for 40 days he's there with them having his resurrection body, which is just like your body except it's glorified and therefore he could go through a wall with it, amazingly. And then he ascended to heaven. Ten days later he poured out the Spirit.

There was a Presbyterian preacher who was listening to a radio show on Easter Sunday morning, and he heard a man say, "It wouldn't make any difference to my faith if they found the body of Jesus," and the man was shaving and almost cut himself shaving. And as soon as he finished shaving, he sat down and wrote this song, "I serve a risen Savior. He's in the world today. I know that he is living. Whatever men may say." And then he said, "You ask me how I know he lives? He lives within my heart."

This is the thing that I would press you with today. Have you received the Holy Ghost? Have you received the Holy Spirit? Have you ever experienced the power of God in the new birth? Have you ever been born again? Because



being born again manifests itself in a changed life. And it's a profound thing. Jesus died and rose again so that every single person here and those of you listening to me on the internet, you can know for sure that Jesus rose from the dead.

Ask God for the sake of Jesus to give you his Holy Spirit. Do you know he will? He never turns anybody down. "Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28) He says, **rest**. Gehenna is a place we just read in Revelation 14 where there's **no rest ever**.

You can find rest today, you can receive the power of the Holy Spirit today, who will live in you, who will change you, no matter how dark your world, no matter how depressed you might be because not to know Jesus in this world is a very, very sad and depressing thing where people have no hope, no hope, and are so depressed looking for this answer, looking for that answer, never finding it.

But if today you will hear his voice, if you will call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and ask him to give you a new heart, he will. He will fill you with his Holy Spirit, and then no matter how sad your life may be, no matter how depressing it may be, you can have the joy of the Lord because in the words of David in Psalm 16, at God's right hand are joys forevermore, eternal pleasures (Psalm 16:11). It's possible in a life, even if your body is eaten up with cancer, and you're living in chronic pain, to have the joy of the Lord inside you. A Spirit-filled Christian is a person who has joy, happiness, confidence, and hope no matter what he's experiencing in this life.

Now, not all Christians are full of the Holy Spirit.

Why don't you ask, if you're a Christian, that God would fill you with the Holy Spirit today?

And if you're not a Christian, why don't you ask God to prove himself to you and to prove the resurrection of Christ by giving you the Holy Spirit? Then you will know, in the words of that Presbyterian preacher who wrote that song, "He lives within my heart."

May we pray.

*Lord, we pray that you would take my feeble words, but a powerful message because it's drawn straight from the Bible, that we may know the Lord Jesus Christ and know that he descended into Hades, into Sheol, in order that none of us would ever end up in Gehenna, the lake of fire, where the worm does not die and the fire is never quenched. May we know you. In Jesus' mighty name. Amen.*