

## THE GOD WHO DESCENDS (1)

### Did Christ descend into hell?

#### A. Introduction <sup>1</sup>

##### 1. He descended to hell!

*"I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.*

*I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to hell. The third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty. From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.*

*I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." (The Apostles' Creed)*

A confusing line – is it saying that Christ went into hell and suffered there?

An unnecessary line – is it just the same as saying 'he was buried'?

A reinterpreted line – does it mean that Christ suffered the agony of hell when He died on the cross?

A glorious line – should we unashamedly believe and confess that Christ descended to hell?

##### 2. What Christ's descent doesn't mean?

It does not mean that Jesus went to hell and suffered there.

It does not mean that Jesus' body was buried.

It does not mean that Jesus went through the suffering of hell on the cross (though it is true that He did).

##### 3. What Christ's descent does mean?

Until the time of the Reformation, "descended into hell" meant and was understood to mean "descended to the dead ones" not to a place of torment.

Christ's descent means that when Jesus died, He experienced death as all humans do, with His body buried ("and was buried") and His soul departing to the place of the dead ("descended to hell").

*"Virgo, partus, et corpus, postque crux, mors, inferi, salus nostra est." [The Virgin, birth, and body, then the cross, death, and lower world; this is our salvation] (Hilary of Poitiers)*

##### 4. Did Jesus' soul when He died, descend to "hell" – to the place of the dead?

#### B. The state of the dead

##### 1. What is death?

A human being has both a body and a soul.

When the soul and the body are separated then death occurs.

"...and the dust returns to the earth as it once was and the spirit returns to God who gave it."  
(Ecclesiastes 12:7)

---

<sup>1</sup> This series is my synthesis and summary of two books that argue for Christ's descent to the place of the dead: *Crux, Mors, Inferi* by Samuel Renihan & *"He Descended to the Dead"* by Matthew Emerson

"For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead." (James 2:26)

Death is the separation of the soul from the body.

A soul without the body is a dead human.

## 2. What happens to the body at death?

At death, the body returns to the earth and becomes dust.

"You will eat bread by the sweat of your brow until you return to the ground, since you were taken from it. For you are dust, and you will return to dust." (Genesis 3:19)

## 3. What happens to the soul at death?

The soul goes to the place of the dead (Sheol).

"Whatever your hands find to do, do with all your strength, because there is no work, planning, knowledge, or wisdom in Sheol where you are going." (Ecclesiastes 9:10)

"All his sons and daughters tried to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. "No," he said. "I will go down to Sheol to my son, mourning." And his father wept for him." (Genesis 37:35)

"The LORD brings death and gives life; he sends some down to Sheol, and he raises others up." (1 Samuel 2:6)

"As a cloud fades away and vanishes, so the one who goes down to Sheol will never rise again. He will never return to his house; his hometown will no longer remember him." (Job 7:9-10)

Sheol in the Old Testament is the place of the dead for both the righteous and the wicked or for just the wicked.

## 4. If Jesus, in His humanity experienced death, as all humans do, His soul and body must have separated.

What happened to His body? It was buried in a tomb.

What happened to His soul? It must have gone to the place of the dead, to Sheol.

"For you will not abandon me to Sheol; you will not allow your faithful one to see decay." (Psalm 16:10)

## C. The place of the dead

### 1. Heaven, earth, and under the earth.

Have you noticed that Scripture speaks of three places or realms where beings (physical and visible or spiritual and invisible) exist?

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." (Genesis 1:1)

"Do not make an idol for yourself, whether in the shape of anything in the heavens above or on the earth below or in the waters under the earth." (Exodus 20:4)

"...so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow—in heaven and on earth and under the earth." (Philippians 2:10)

"For everything was created by him, in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through him and for him." (Colossians 1:16)

"But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or even to look in it." (Revelation 5:3)

The three realms are heaven, earth, and under the earth. Of these three places, only earth is visible.

#### *a) Heaven*

Heaven is the dwelling place of God where He is surrounded and served by His holy angels and displays His glory.

"Immediately I was in the Spirit, and there was a throne in heaven and someone was seated on it. The one seated there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian stone. A rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald surrounded the throne. Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and on the thrones sat twenty-four elders dressed in white clothes, with golden crowns on their heads. Flashes of lightning and rumblings and peals of thunder came from the throne. Seven fiery torches were burning before the throne, which are the seven spirits of God. Something like a sea of glass, similar to crystal, was also before the throne. Four living creatures covered with eyes in front and in back were around the throne on each side." (Revelation 4:2-6)

It is also referred to as the third heaven (with the first heaven being the sky, and the second heaven being space).

"I know a man in Christ who was caught up to the third heaven fourteen years ago. Whether he was in the body or out of the body, I don't know; God knows." (2 Corinthians 12:2)

#### *b) Earth*

Earth is primarily the place where humans live, but also includes the rest of the universe.

It is the world God has created which can be seen.

#### *c) Under the earth*

Under the earth or Sheol is the place where the souls of the dead, the devil, and demons (fallen angelic beings) live.

It is the place to which beings descend.

"Can you fathom the depths of God or discover the limits of the Almighty? They are higher than the heavens—what can you do? They are deeper than Sheol—what can you know? Their measure is longer than the earth and wider than the sea." (Job 11:7-9)

"Where can I go to escape your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I fly on the wings of the dawn and settle down on the western horizon, even there your hand will lead me; your right hand will hold on to me." (Psalm 139:7-10)

"The heavens are the LORD's, but the earth he has given to the human race. It is not the dead who praise the LORD, nor any of those descending into the silence of death." (Psalm 115:16-17)

Under the earth (Sheol) is divided into three separate compartments: Upper Sheol, Lower Sheol, and the Abyss.

The beings in each of these compartments experience a foretaste of their eternal fate.

"One day the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. And being in torment in Hades, he looked up and saw Abraham a long way off, with Lazarus at his side. 'Father Abraham!' he called out, 'Have mercy on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this flame!' "'Son,' Abraham said, 'remember that during your life you received your good things, just as Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here, while you are in agony. Besides all this, a great chasm has been fixed between us and you, so that those who want to pass over from here to you cannot; neither can those from there cross over to us.'" (Luke 16:22-26)

## 2. Upper Sheol, Lower Sheol, and the Abyss.

### *a) Upper Sheol*

Upper Sheol is where the souls of the righteous dead go.

"He took his last breath and died at a good old age, old and contented, and he was gathered to his people." (Genesis 25:8)

"The death of his faithful ones is valuable in the LORD'S sight." (Psalm 116:15)

It is also called paradise or Abraham's side.

Upper Sheol is not a place of suffering or torment.

In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, in Upper Sheol Lazarus is comforted.

Upper Sheol is the place where the souls of the righteous dead await the coming of Christ.

### *b) Lower Sheol*

Lower Sheol is where the souls of the wicked dead go.

It is also called Hades.

Lower Sheol is a place of suffering and torment.

In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, in Lower Sheol the rich man is in agony.

### *c) The Abyss*

The Abyss is part of Sheol, distinct from Upper Sheol where the souls of the righteous are comforted, and Lower Sheol where the souls of the wicked are tormented.

It is where fallen angels have been imprisoned and are being kept until final judgment where they will be thrown into the lake of fire.

"For if God didn't spare the angels who sinned but cast them into hell and delivered them in chains of utter darkness to be kept for judgment." (2 Peter 2:4)

"...and the angels who did not keep their own position but abandoned their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains in deep darkness for the judgment on the great day." (Jude 6)

"For he had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. Many times it had seized him, and though he was guarded, bound by chains and shackles, he would snap the restraints and be driven by the demon into deserted places. "What is your name?" Jesus asked him. "Legion," he said, because many demons had entered him. And they begged him not to banish them to the abyss." (Luke 8:39-41)

## 3. If Jesus, in His humanity experienced death, as all humans do, His soul must have descended to the place of the dead.

To Upper Sheol or paradise where all the souls of the righteous dead go.

"Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And he said to him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise." (Luke 23:42-43)

The souls of the righteous dead no longer needed to await the coming of Christ because He was now present with them in His human soul.

This will change everything because He will not stay there, and neither will they.