

## THE GOD WHO DESCENDS (3)

### Why Christ's descent is good news

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

1. Christ's descent does not mean He "descended to hell" but that He "descended to the dead" ones.

When Jesus died, in His humanity, He experienced death, as all humans do.

His soul and body were separated because that is what death is.

His body was buried.

His soul went to the place of the dead (Sheol).

This was the view of the early church from the second century onwards (see Justin Martyr, Gregory the Great, Chrysostom, Jerome, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Augustine, Maximus the Confessor, The Apostles' and Athanasian Creed).

2. The place of the dead (Sheol or Under the Earth) is the unseen realm where the souls of the dead and the devil and fallen angels descend to and live.

In the Old Testament, Sheol is used to refer to the place of the dead in general, and to the place of the unrighteous dead.

"Many who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to eternal life, and some to disgrace and eternal contempt." (Daniel 12:2)

By the time of the Second Temple (515BC-70AD), Sheol was understood as being divided into three separate compartments.

This was the common understanding during period of Jesus and the Apostles.

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)

Upper Sheol (paradise, Abraham's side) is where the souls of the righteous dead are at rest and comforted while they wait in hope for the coming of the Christ.

Lower Sheol (Hades, Gehenna) is where the souls of the unrighteous dead are in torment while they wait for the final judgment.

The Abyss is where fallen angels are imprisoned and are being kept until they are thrown into the lake of fire.

"...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)

3. After Jesus' death, because of His righteous life, His human soul descended to where all the souls of the righteous dead go, and where He remained until His resurrection.

"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)

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<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

By descending to the place of the dead, Jesus proclaimed His victory over death to those under the earth (the dead and the fallen angels).

"For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, in which he also went and made proclamation to the spirits in prison who in the past were disobedient, when God patiently waited in the days of Noah while the ark was being prepared." (1 Peter 3:18-20)

By descending to the place of the dead, Jesus leads His people out of it.

"For it says: When he ascended on high, he took the captives captive; he gave gifts to people. But what does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower parts of the earth? The one who descended is also the one who ascended far above all the heavens, to fill all things." (Ephesians 4:8-10)

The presence of Christ's human soul in paradise changed it forever.

#### 4. Paradise then, now, and forever.

Paradise then.

Up until the descent of Christ's human soul, paradise was the righteous compartment located in Sheol.

It was where the souls of Old Testament saints were at rest from sin, suffering, and service in the presence of God.

"But as for you, go on your way to the end; you will rest, and then you will rise to receive your allotted inheritance at the end of the days." (Daniel 12:13)

"...if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there." (Psalm 139:8)

"And Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I entrust my spirit." Saying this, he breathed his last." (Luke 23:46)

It was where the souls of Old Testaments saints waited in hope for the coming of Christ.

Paradise now.

After Christ's human soul descended to Sheol, paradise went from being a place of hope to a place of sight.

In His descent Christ was with the souls of Old Testament saints in His human soul and after the ascension with them in His human body too.

Paradise as a spiritual reality is now no longer located in Sheol near the place of torment but in heaven (the third heaven) where God dwells.

"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. I know that this man—whether in the body or out of the body I don't know; God knows— was caught up into paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a human being is not allowed to speak." (2 Corinthians 12:2-4)

"Instead, you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God (the heavenly Jerusalem), to myriads of angels, a festive gathering, to the assembly of the firstborn whose names have been written in heaven, to a Judge, who is God of all, to the spirits of righteous people made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which says better things than the blood of Abel." (Hebrews 12:22-24)

All who believe in Jesus are at rest in the presence of the resurrected and ascended Christ in His human soul and body, where they wait for their bodies to rise.

"I am torn between the two. I long to depart and be with Christ—which is far better." (Philippians 1:23)

“For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the archangel’s voice, and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are still alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.” (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17)

Paradise forever.

Paradise now is not yet the ultimate paradise of the new heavens and the new earth where we will dwell bodily with Christ.

“Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.” (Revelation 2:7)

## **B. The Good News of Christ’s Descent <sup>2</sup>**

1. Christ’s descent means that we can have hope in the face of death.

“because you will not abandon me in Hades or allow your holy one to see decay.” (Acts 2:27)

He has experienced death in the same way we do.

He knows what it like to remain dead. He really and truly died.

And because He wasn’t abandoned by God in death (neither in His body or soul), we can be certain that we won’t either.

He has walked through the valley of the shadow of death to eternal life for us and ahead of us.

Therefore, we do not fear our deaths nor grieve without hope for those have died trusting in Christ.

“We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, concerning those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve like the rest, who have no hope.” (1 Thessalonians 4:13)

2. Christ’s descent means that we can be sure that He is with us in our deaths.

When we die our souls go to paradise.

Paradise is no longer in Sheol but in heaven when Jesus is present in His human soul and body.

*“The Good Shepherd is now the Shepherd of Death. And you will never see Sheol. The dead who “die in the Lord” are “with the Lord.” (Samuel Renihan)*

3. Christ’s descent means that He is King over Death and Hades.

“When I saw him, I fell at his feet like a dead man. He laid his right hand on me and said, “Don’t be afraid. I am the First and the Last, and the Living One. I was dead, but look—I am alive forever and ever, and I hold the keys of death and Hades.” (Revelation 1:17-18)

He has defeated Death and Hades by His death, burial, descent, and resurrection.

He holds the Keys to Death and Hades.

He can save people from Death and Hades.

One day He will destroy Death and Hades.

## **C. How then shall we live?**

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Why (and How) to Preach Christ’s Descent to the Dead by Matthew Emerson

1. Christ's descent is a truth to believe.

*"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)*

It is part of the gospel.

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners by taking on flesh, living a righteous life, dying on the cross, His body was buried, and His soul went to the place of the dead, He rose again on the third day, then ascended into heaven where He sits at God's right hand, interceding for His people, until He returns to judge the living and the dead.

All who confess that Jesus Christ is Lord and believe God raised Him body and soul from the dead will be saved.

It helps us make sense of Scripture.

Clarity is brought to some of the tricky passages if we understand Christ's descent and its relationship to the state of the dead and place of the dead.

2. Christ's descent is a truth to declare.

The Apostles' Creed including the line about Christ's descent is to be known (it can be helpful to daily confess it), taught (as a guide for instructing new believers), and confessed (in our worship services).

We can unite with Christians throughout the ages in declaring, *"I believe... He descended to the dead."*

We may not want to say "He descended to hell" because of the confusion this brings, but we should not delete the line from the core truths the church has declared.

3. Christ's descent is a truth to remember.

In baptism we remember Christ's death, burial, (descent), and resurrection.

By remembering Christ's descent at baptism, this means of grace can be used by God to strengthen our belief that because Christ has been victorious over sin, death, and Satan, so we will be because of our union with Him.

In the Lord's Supper we remember and proclaim Christ's death until He comes.

By remembering Christ's descent at the Lord Supper, this means of grace can be used by God to strengthen our faith that because He has led His people out of Sheol, that is no longer where our souls will be at rest until He comes.

4. Christ's descent is a truth that is good news.

*"Christ descended into Hades so that you and I would not have to. Christ descended to Hades so that we might ascend to heaven. Christ entered the realm of death, the realm of the strong enemy, and came away with his keys. The keys of Death and Hades are now in our Saviour's hands. And God his Father has exalted him to his right hand, and given him another key, the key of David, the key to the heavenly Jerusalem. He opens and no one will shut, he shuts and no one will open. And praise to him, as the hymn says, "For he hath opened the heavenly door, and man is blessed forever more." (Charles Hill)*