

## ***He Descended to the Dead*<sup>1</sup>**

### **Good Friday 2022**

The next part of the Apostles' Creed states:

“He descended to the dead”

This line in the creed is one of maybe two lines that are the most difficult to understand or perhaps the most controversial. So, I want to spend just a few minutes this evening explaining what that line of the creed has tried to communicate, explain why it is biblical, and ultimately why it even matters for us today.

#### **I. Background of statement**

Ultimately, this line in the creed was written and included by the church with the desire to make a confession of belief about where Jesus was and what Jesus accomplished in between his death on Friday and his resurrection on Sunday. It is a confession about what has been called “Holy Saturday” and refers to the doctrine of Christ’s descent.

And though it has faced some opposition by Christians, particularly in our modern time, it was a doctrine that was regularly confessed as early as the second century. Church fathers such as Ignatius, Polycarp, Irenaeus, Justin, and Tertullian all referred to this doctrine in their writings.

Some of the confusion about this doctrine, if your familiar with the Apostles' Creed, stems from the fact that some of our English translations say that Jesus descended to hell. But really, it is a better translation from the Latin to say that he descended to the “dead.” The Latin phrases that were used in the creed throughout history didn’t imply or teach that Jesus descended to what we think of as hell—the place of torment, judgment, and suffering—rather it referred to the general realm of the dead.

So, that is why in our presentation of the Apostles' Creed, we use the phrasing that Jesus descended to the dead.

And it is important to understand what the Church has taught about this for the last 2,000 years, but ultimately we want to know, where did they get this doctrine? Is there biblical evidence for the belief that when Jesus died on the cross that his soul went to the place of the dead?

Much of the information for this sermon is based on the book by Matthew Y. Emerson, <sup>1</sup> *He Descended to the Dead: An Evangelical Theology of Holy Saturday* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019).

## II. Is it biblical?<sup>2</sup>

There is much that could be said but I have to be selective tonight about what passages to look at.

The Bible teaches that when Jesus rose from the dead, he rose not just from the *state* of being dead, but from the *place* of the dead and from *among* the dead ones.

### 1 Cor. 15:20

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

The phrase “from the dead” is used to describe not just that Jesus was dead but now alive, but that he was raised from among the many who had died before.

Paul is clearer in Romans 10...

### Rom. 10:6-7

**6** But the righteousness based on faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down) **7** “or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).

Here Paul is asking who has the power to go to heaven and bring Christ down or who can descend and bring Christ up? And there Paul connects a place, “the abyss,” with the phrase “from the dead.” This is the same phrase he uses in 1 Cor. 15. In other words, Jesus was raised not just from the state of being dead, but from the *place* of the dead and from *among* the dead ones.

The Bible presents a view of the cosmos in three tiers: heaven, earth, and the underworld. The underworld being the place of the dead. And it is described in many different ways, teaching that there are different compartments, so to speak, among the dead where souls are in what is called this intermediate state. This state of death until Jesus returns and the unrighteous dead will be judged and cast away while the righteous dead, those who are saved in Christ, will be resurrected and live with Christ forever. Further, the Bible speaks of rebellious angels being kept in prison or chains during this time.

So Scripture uses terms such as “Hades,” “Sheol,” or “the abyss” to speak of the place of the dead in a general sense. The Bible also speaks of “paradise” or “Abraham’s bosom” as the place of the righteous dead. And then it speaks of

<sup>2</sup> There are more passages that speak to this doctrine than I have time to address in this

short sermon. For more consideration, see Luke 16:19-31, 23:43; Acts 2:25-28; 2 Cor. 12:3; Eph. 4:7-10; Phil. 2:10; 1 Peter 3:18-20, 4:6; Rev. 20:13.

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“Gehenna” or the lake of fire for that final place of judgment for the unrighteous, that place that we are referring to when we speak of hell.

So, when the Church has confessed Jesus descended to the dead, it has meant that Jesus descended to the place of the righteous dead. Jesus, if you remember, on the cross told one of the others being crucified beside him who made a confession of faith that they would both be in paradise that day.

And it wasn't only Paul who would teach this, Jesus himself, would tell his disciples that this would be true of him.

In Matthew 12 we read about a time during Jesus' life and ministry when some of the Jewish religious leaders came to Jesus asking for him to perform some kind of sign. Jesus, however, says no, I'm not going to perform a sign for you except for what Jesus calls “the sign go Jonah.”

He describes it this way...

### **Matthew 12:40**

For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

Calling back to the Old Testament story of Jonah, if you remember, Jonah was called by God to preach in Nineveh, but Jonah doesn't want to go so he gets on a boat going the opposite way. God sends a storm and Jonah is thrown into the sea where a large fish swallows him and he remains there for three days and three nights before being spit out on dry land.

Jesus would perform “the sign of Jonah,” which is clearly speaking about his resurrection. But it also speaks to his descent.

Jonah in the belly of the whale prays...

### **Jonah 2:2-3**

**2** “I called out to the Lord, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. **3** For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me.

Here Jonah says, God has cast him into the “heart of the seas” a place that he describes as Sheol. Jesus in Matthew 12 says that he will be three days and three

nights in, using the same language, “the heart of the earth.”

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The point being “Both Jesus (literally) and Jonah (figuratively symbolically) descend to the depths of the pit, Hades, Sheol, the abyss...Jesus does not merely compare the timeframe of his death to the timeframe of Jonah’s time in the fish...Rather, Jesus compares himself to Jonah because what happens to them—the former literally and the latter figuratively—is the same...They descend to the place of the dead. Jonah’s body is in the fish (grave) while his soul, metaphorically, is in Sheol; Jesus’ body is in the heart of the earth (grave) while his soul, literally, is in the place of the dead.”<sup>3</sup>

More passages could be looked at and many more questions could be answered, but with a very basic biblical foundation laid for this belief that Jesus descended to the dead, we want to ask, why does this matter? Why is this important? What difference does this make? Why are we even talking about this on Good Friday and Easter weekend?

### **III. Why does it matter?**

Let me offer you two reasons why Christ’s descent matters.

#### **1. It means that Christ experienced death in the same way we do.**

Jesus really died. His body was really buried and his soul departed to the place of the dead.

When the Bible speaks of us having a high priest in Jesus who can sympathize with our weaknesses, this includes physical death. When our loved ones pass away or we face death ourselves we really can turn to Jesus. He understands death because he has experienced death, just like we will.

So, this doctrine means that Christ experienced death in the same way we do, but even more...

#### **2. Christ also defeated death. Not only did he descend but he also ascended. He rose again, which we will celebrate on Sunday.**

And because he ascended, those of us who are with him, though we might descend in death, we will raise to eternal life in glorified form. But Christ has gone before us.

There is an important scene in our Old Testament book of Numbers, where the nation of Israel is making their way through the desert towards the Promised Land. And they were led by the ark of the covenant.

## Numbers 10:33

Emerson, *He Descended to the Dead*, 52. <sup>3</sup>

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So they set out from the mount of the Lord three days' journey. And the ark of the covenant of the Lord went before them three days' journey, to seek out a resting place for them.

The people of Israel leave Mt. Sinai but we are told that the ark of the covenant, that artifact that represented God's presence with them, went ahead three days journey before them.

One theologian notes, "Just as the Ark of the Covenant went before the people of Israel through the wilderness for three days to find a place for them to rest, so Christ has gone before us through the wilderness of Hades to prepare a place for us to rest in him."<sup>4</sup>

This is the importance of Christ's death for us. His body nailed to the cross. After his death, this body buried in the tomb. His soul descended to the place of the dead where he would proclaim victory to the dead before his resurrection on Sunday.

And so when faced with death, we grieve, but we don't grieve as those without hope. Why? Because Jesus went to the grave too and, even more than that, defeated it.

And the good news of the gospel is that those who put their faith in Jesus, turning from their sin and turning to him in faith, we follow the same journey as Jesus. Though we die, death is not the end. We go with Jesus who has walked that way before us, and so we can even walk with confidence and boldness.

## Lord's Supper

But what we celebrate on Sunday could not have happened without everything that happened on Friday and Saturday. The significance of the death of Christ can never be overstated. It is the moment that all of history looked forward to beforehand, and though on this side of the cross we look forward to a glorious future with Christ, we have that hope only because of Christ's past work on the cross and his descent to the dead so we want to continually look back in remembrance.

To help us remember what Jesus did for us that Good Friday, he instituted what is called the Lord's Supper or communion, a physical picture of a spiritual truth: that Jesus, God in the flesh, would offer his flesh and spill his blood as the ultimate sacrificial Lamb. And by his sacrifice our sins are atoned for, God's wrath is satisfied,

and we have access to the Father for all eternity.

That is what the bread and juice point to each time we eat and drink together. It is the tangible reminder of everything we've talked about, sung about it, and read about this evening.

Ibid., 225.<sup>4</sup>

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So with both somber, yet joyful, hearts we want to observe communion tonight together. If you are a follower of Jesus, someone who was trusted in Christ as their Savior and King, we invite you to partake of the elements sometime during the next two sings when you are ready.

**PRAY**

