



MESSAGE

STUDY GUIDE

GROUP MATERIAL

SONGS

# Mission of God: Did Jesus Really “Descend into Hell”?

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## SUMMARY:

Jesus was crucified & buried on Easter Friday; he rose early Sunday. Where was Jesus during the interval? We hear a lot about ‘Good Friday’ & ‘Easter Sunday,’ very little about ‘Holy Saturday.’ What (if anything) did Jesus do that day? His body lay in the tomb; what about his (immaterial) soul & spirit? Were they with God the Father? Or did they simply “continue in the state of the dead” (Westminster Catechism)? Paul says Christ “descended into earth’s lower regions” (Eph. 4:8). The Apostles’ Creed’s cryptic phrase, “he descended into Hell,” echoes this; did they get it right? If so, why did Jesus descend; what does Scripture say? Diverse NT texts—from Jesus, Peter, & Paul—support the Creed’s descent clause. What did his ‘descent’ accomplish? Plus, what does all this imply for us today?

- Apostles’ Creed: “I believe in Jesus Christ...who suffered under Pontius Pilate, was *crucified, died, and was buried*. *He descended into Hell*; the 3rd day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into Heaven, & sits at the right hand of God...”

## I. Clarifying—What does ‘Hell’ mean in the Creed?

- A. Confusing ‘Hell’ & ‘Hades’
- B. Christ descended to Hades (OT Sheol)
- C. Christ’s ‘Descent’—Metaphorical, Vacuous, or Actual?
  1. ‘Descent into Hell’—merely a metaphor (Reformed)
  2. “Descent into Hell”—just means ‘Christ continued in the state of the dead’—that’s vacuous!
  3. Christ’s Descent—an actual, significant event:
    - “*Jesus did go somewhere after his burial & before his resurrection...Something of significance did happen between the burial & resurrection...which the Church eventually...preserve[d] in the phrase ‘he*

descended into hell’.—David Scaer

## II. Christ’s Cosmic Tour in Ephesians (Eph. 4:8-11)

### A. Christ’s Triumphal Procession—from the Cross to Hades to God’s Throne

1. **Death** on the Cross (1st day: ‘Good Friday’) (Col. 2:15; Jn. 19:30)
2. **Buried** (1st day: ‘Good Friday’ PM) “Christ died for our sins...he was buried...” (1 Cor. 15:3-4)
3. **Descent** “to the earth’s lower parts”—Hades, the underworld. The 2nd day, ‘Holy Saturday’ (Eph. 4:9)
4. **Resurrection** (3rd day: ‘Easter Sunday’ AM) “he was raised on the 3rd day” (1 Cor. 15:4b)
5. **Ascension**—“He ascended...; he led captivity captive [He led a train of vanquished foes]” (Eph. 4:8 Amp.)
  - a. Triumphal Procession—who are the “host of captives”? (Eph. 4:8)
  - b. Christ’s Captives: his defeated foes—principalities, cosmic powers, etc.
  - c. Christ’s Captives: OT saints—Moses, David, Daniel, etc. (see Mt. 27:51-53)
  - d. Christ’s Captives: NT Believers—Stephen, Paul, etc., you & me
  - e. Believers—released Hostages of Dark Cosmic Powers (2 Cor. 2:14)
  - f. Relocating ‘Paradise’ from Hades to Heaven—too ‘physical’??
  - g. Changing the nature of ‘paradise’—not about place, but person
6. **Gift-giving** “Giving gifts to his people” (Eph. 4:8b)—“he gave some apostles, some prophets...” (Eph. 4:11)

### B. Have you joined Christ’s triumphal procession? Are you being constituted a gift to his Church? (2 Cor. 2:14)

## III. Christ’s Descent to ‘the lower regions of the earth’ (Eph. 4:8-9)

### A. Christ’s descent to Hades between his death & resurrection

### B. Descent in Eph. 4:9 is Not Incarnation—Christ’s descent from Heaven to Earth (e.g. Phil 2:6-7)

## IV. Descent Doctrine Based on Scripture, not a single ‘proof text’

## V. Christ’s Descent to Hades: Corroborating Scriptures (Mt. 12:39-40; Acts 2:27-28, 31; 1 Pet. 3:18-20)

- A. The Sign of Jonah (Mt. 12:39-40)
- B. Paul: Don’t say “who will ascend...?” or “Who will descent...?” (Rom. 10:6-7)
- C. Peter: Christ not abandoned in Hades (Acts 2:27-28, 31)
- D. Jesus told the thief on the cross “Today you’ll be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43)
- E. Peter: Christ proclaimed to the imprisoned Spirits (1 Peter 3:18-20)
- F. ‘Handle with Caution’—Parable of Rich Man & Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)

## VI. Christ’s Descent embodied in Historic Christian Creeds

- Apostles’ Creed (~400 AD) says: “I believe in Jesus Christ...Who...suffered under Pontius Pilate, was *crucified, died, & was buried. He descended into Hell; the 3rd day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into Heaven...*”
- A. The Apostles’ Creed—Importance: “*The Apostles’ Creed is the Creed of creeds.*”—Phillip Schaff
  - “The Apostles’ Creed includes *Christ’s descent into Hades as an essential tenet* of Christian orthodoxy.”—
  - D. Daugherty
    - “The popularity of the [Apostles’] Creed is almost unparalleled...to the point whereas the ‘Lord’s Prayer is the Prayer of prayers, the [10 Commandments] is the Law of laws, so *the Apostles’ Creed is the Creed of creeds.*”—Phillip Schaff
- B. . The Apostles’ Creed—History: first appears 359 AD
- C. Until 1500 ‘Descent’ (Eph. 4:9) meant ‘Descent to Hades’

- “Christ’s descent into Hades...received unanimous support...in the centuries before the Reformation.”—Z. Seals, J. Bush
- “Up to the Reformation...descent in Eph. 4:9 was unanimously understood as Christ’s descent to Hades.”—T. Scacewater

## VII. What does Christ’s Descent mean for Christians Today?

- A. As a genuine human being, Christ fully experienced Death
- B. No Cosmic Realm is outside the sphere of Christ’s lordship, or can exclude His presence
- C. Christ ‘has the Keys of Death & Hades’ (Rev. 1:18) & Hades’ Gates won’t prevail against Christ’s Church (Mt. 16:18)

## VIII. Eph. 4: Christ’s Descent & Ascent—to give Gifts to His Church

### Questions:

1. Prior to Sunday’s message (March 7) & the accompanying material:
  - a. What was your understanding of the phrase “He [Christ] descended into Hell” or “...into Hades” or “...to the Dead”?
  - b. How would you answer the query—“Where was Christ (his soul/spirit) on Saturday, between death & resurrection”?
  - c. What (if anything) was Jesus doing (via his soul/spirit) on Saturday, between death & resurrection”?
2. In what ways (if any) has the message (& materials, & your study/discussion) changed your understanding?
3. The Apostles’ Creed says Christ “died, & was buried. He descended into Hell; the 3rd day He rose again from the dead...”
 

Notice the historical sequence. With this is view, how would you evaluate the claims that according to the Creed:

  - a. “*He descended into Hell*” describes Christ’s ‘sufferings of Hell’ while on the cross
  - b. “*He descended into Hell*” means “Christ continued in the state of the dead’ ‘til the 3rd day
  - c. “*He descended into Hell*” means Christ continued to suffer for us, even after his burial, ‘til his resurrection
  - d. “*He descended into Hell*” means Christ (as a genuine human) descended to the realm of the dead (Hades/Sheol)
4. The message & materials presented Bible passages used to support the view that Jesus descended to Hades—Mt. 12:39-40; Acts 2:27-28, 31; 1 Pet. 3:18-20, etc; which of these passages presents the strongest case for this view? Discuss.
5. David Scaer asserts “*Jesus did go somewhere after his burial & before his resurrection...Something of significance did happen between the burial & his resurrection.*” Based on the Scriptures (e.g. Q4 above):
  - a. Where did Jesus go after his burial & before his resurrection?
  - b. What happened (what did Jesus do) between the burial & his resurrection?
6. Paul appeals to the descent & ascent of Christ (Eph. 4:8-10) in the context of the church, its gifts & gifted people (Eph. 4:9-13). How should Christ’s descent & ascent affect our view of the church, of CIT, & our gifts?
7. More generally, what does all this imply for us today?