



# THE JOURNEY CHURCH

SERMON GUIDE 4.16.2022

WEEKEND OF HOPE 2022 - HOLY SATURDAY

The Descent of Christ to the Dead

**SCRIPTURE:**

Ephesians 4:8-10

**RECAP:**

Samuel Renihan writes, "Hades is impossible to escape. And heaven is impossible to enter. But Christ has broken the gates of Hades and opened wide the gates of heaven." I'm going to spend the rest of this sermon explaining what those sentences mean. My message is on the descent of Christ to the dead. We are examining what happened after Jesus died and before he rose again. Good Friday focuses on the death of Jesus. Resurrection Sunday celebrates the empty tomb. But what was the spirit of Christ doing while his body laid in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea?

We speak about this in the Apostle's Creed, which we recite weekly here:

"He suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
Was crucified, died, and was buried.

***He descended to the dead,***

The third day he rose again from the dead."

Notice that line again: He descended to the dead. What does that mean? Why have believers that have recited this and believed this from the start of the church? Where do we find this in Scripture? And what is the purpose? The teaching on Christ's descent has been lost in our modern age, though you will find it throughout church history, from the very beginning. The reason for this is because our understanding of God's created realms, and what the Old Testament taught about the afterlife is not understood very well today. There is a reason for that, that I'll get into later. But I believe a retrieval of understanding and celebrating the doctrine of Christ's descent is underway. And I believe

it only strengthens our faith, and demonstrates Jesus as incomparably glorious, to grasp it.

Before we get specifically into the work of Christ between his death and resurrection, we must first discuss the realms of God's creation. When God made all things "in the beginning," this includes three realms: heaven, earth, and under the earth. And these realms can be understood as being a visible world and an invisible world.

**Colossians 1:16 -- *For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.***

The visible world consists of one realm: "earth." The invisible world consists of two realms: "heaven" and "under the earth." Listen to a few passages highlighting this:

**Revelation 5:3 -- *And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it***

**Philippians 2:10 -- *so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth***

Heaven is that realm where God dwells and manifests His glory. He is served and surrounded by angelic beings. We are told it is a place of beauty, grandeur, and majesty. God is not spatially bound to Heaven. He is everywhere. But He manifests His glory in Heaven.

Earth is the visible realm that we know and inhabit. It's the material world. It includes the universe (or the cosmos), the stars and galaxies. This is the theater of God's glory, and the dwelling place of man.

Under the earth refers to the realm where all unholy spiritual beings dwell (unholy angels or demons), and the human dead (souls without bodies). Important note: This definition will change by the end of the sermon. Keep that in mind as I define it now. We saw the under the earth mentioned in the other passages. We are going to have a "Before the descent of Christ" reality and a "Post descent of Christ" reality.

But we see it referenced elsewhere, particularly throughout the Old Testament.

**Job 11:7-9 -- “Can you find out the deep things of God?  
Can you find out the limit of the Almighty?”  
It is higher than heaven—what can you do?  
Deeper than Sheol—what can you know?  
Its measure is longer than the earth and broader than the sea.**

**Psalm 139:7-10 -- Where shall I go from your Spirit?  
Or where shall I flee from your presence?  
If I ascend to heaven, you are there!  
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!  
If I take the wings of the morning  
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,  
even there your hand shall lead me,  
and your right hand shall hold me.**

When you read the word "Sheol" in the Old Testament, this is the same place that Paul and John refer to when they say "under the earth." Sheol is the place that the dead descend to, hence "under the earth." Sheol is the place where the human dead, and demons dwell. It sometimes goes by the name "the pit" or "the abyss." Sometimes Scripture refers to it as "the lowest part of the earth."

It is important to note here that the language of "up" and "down" are metaphorical in nature. Heaven is not "up there." It is an invisible realm. Sheol is not "down there." It is an invisible realm. The Scripture regularly uses language from the visible world to make the invisible world intelligible to us. Just as Sheol is described as the lowest place, Heaven is described as the highest place. It is called "the highest heaven" or "the third heaven." The first heaven was considered the space from the sky to the moon, the second heaven the moon to the farthest stars, and the third heaven the realm beyond observation, where God dwelled.

So these are the realms of creation. Heaven, earth, and under the earth. Earth is visible. Heaven and under the earth are invisible realms. Heaven is where God and His angels dwell, and under the earth (Sheol) is the place of the human dead, and fallen angels.

Again, this definition will change in a minute...because of Jesus.

But let's put some more thought and study on the idea of Sheol as the place for all human dead. This stops some people in their tracks because we often think exclusively in terms of "God's people go up to Heaven" and "the unrighteous down to Hell." We'll get back to that idea, but the Old Testament shows the picture of all the human dead going to Sheol. But here's what I want to show: 1. All human dead went to Sheol, and 2. There were compartments/divisions of Sheol based on the righteous and unrighteous.

Sheol as the place for all human dead:

**Ecclesiastes 9:10 -- *Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.***

**Genesis 37:35 -- *All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted and said, "No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning." Thus his father wept for him.***

**1 Samuel 2:6 -- *The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up.***

**Job 7:9-10 -- *As the cloud fades and vanishes, so he who goes down to Sheol does not come up; he returns no more to his house, nor does his place know him anymore.***

**Isaiah 38:9-11 -- *A writing of Hezekiah king of Judah, after he had been sick and had recovered from his sickness: I said, In the middle of my days I must depart; I am consigned to the gates of Sheol for the rest of my years. I said, I shall not see the LORD, the LORD in the land of the living; I shall look on man no more among the inhabitants of the world.***

What's wild is how prominent this teaching is throughout the Old Testament, but how we're blinded to it because 1. we haven't been taught to understand what the Scriptures teach, and 2. we impose our post-death and resurrection views back onto the Old Testament.

So all the human dead will be in Sheol, but not everyone's experience in Sheol is the same. There are divisions or compartments. The righteous go to Abraham's Bosom or Paradise. The unrighteous go to Gehenna or Hades. Jesus tells a story in Luke 16:19-31 about a man named Lazarus who dies (not his friend Lazarus that he raised from the dead). Lazarus goes to the place of the dead, Sheol. But he is in "Abraham's Bosom," meaning he is comforted and at rest. But a rich man who was unrighteous died and he went to Sheol, but in torment in Hades. From the story it appears they are able to see one another, but the key here is the contrast between the two experiences. Both die, both go to Sheol, but their experiences are different. One goes to Abraham's Bosom, the other to Hades. We also see the thief on the cross promised by Jesus that he would be with him that day in Paradise. What is fascinating to me about this is that he doesn't mean in Heaven, but Sheol. Jesus on that day would be in Sheol, in Paradise, but not yet ascended to Heaven.

We also see in the Old Testament that after Samuel the prophet dies, he is in Sheol, and King Saul summons his spirit through a medium. Saul tells the woman, "Bring up Samuel." "Bring up" because he is in Sheol. Which is why we should not be so foolish to mess around with psychics or Ouija Boards or any other spiritism things. We live in a world with more than simply flesh and blood. But notice here that Samuel, a man of God and prophet of God, is in Sheol...not Heaven. Because this is where all human dead went.

There are also fallen angels, or demons there. They are in a place called: Tartarus. There were angels that fell from grace in rebellion with Satan. Some of those spirits have been chained and sentenced from that time, while others are still free. This word is used once in the New Testament.

**2 Peter 2:4 -- *"For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment."***

The word "hell" here is translated from the word Tartarus.

This idea is repeated again by Jude even though he doesn't use the word "Tartarus" he is referring to the same place.

**Jude 1:6 -- *And the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day—***

So Sheol, in the Old Testament, contains 3 compartments or divisions: Paradise/Abraham's Bosom (the righteous dead), Gehenna/Hades (the unrighteous dead), and Tartarus (fallen angels/ demons).

This is the "Before the Descent of Christ" reality. It can be summarized in Psalm 89:48.

**Psalm 89:48 -- *What man can live and never see death? Who can deliver his soul from the power of Sheol?***

That feels hopeless. But there is a light of hope.

**Psalm 49:15 -- *But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me.***

That ransom from Sheol comes through the finished work of Jesus. This is why the descent of Christ to the dead is such an important doctrine. So let's talk about what the descent of Christ is all about.

The Old Testament contains promises throughout about a coming Messiah, not only for Israel, but one who will be a light to the Gentiles. This Messiah was coming as victorious king, but also as an atonement (think Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53). But one of the images of the Messiah was in the prophecy of Psalm 16.

**Psalm 16:8-11 -- *I have set the LORD always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure. For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption. You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.***

The Messiah's soul will descend to Sheol, but will not be abandoned there. It will be buried, but will not see corruption. It's not a mistake that when Peter stood to preach his first sermon at Pentecost in Acts 2, he quoted this passage about Jesus' death and resurrection.

Where was Jesus' soul after he cried out "It is finished" and breathed his last at the cross? The testimony of the Scriptures is that his soul descended to every tier of Sheol--to Abraham's Bosom, Hades, and even the abyss itself.

**Matthew 12:39-40 -- 39 But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. 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.**

**Jonah 2:1-3 -- 1 Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, 2 saying, "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.**

What did Jesus do in Sheol? He did not go to suffer, but to subdue. He did not go for punishment, but to liberate.

### **1. He bound the strong man and preached to the wicked.**

Jesus taught that a strong man must be overpowered by a stronger man before his home and goods can be plundered. Jesus demonstrated he is the stronger man during his ministry when he cast out demons. Jesus descends to the lair of the serpent to crush his skull and declare his victory. He is the victor. He possesses the keys to Death and Hades.

**Revelation 1:12-20 -- 12 Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, 13 and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. 14 The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, 15 his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. 16 In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. 17 When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, 18 and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. 19 Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take**

***place after this. 20 As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.***

Another passage that describes Jesus' proclamation of victory in Sheol is 1 Peter 3:18-22.

***1 Peter 3:18-22 -- 18 For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, 19 in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, 20 because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. 21 Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, 22 who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.***

Jesus doesn't go to preach an evangelistic message. He goes to preach a victory. He holds the keys now to Death and Hades. He has the authority. It belongs to him. He is the victor.

## **2. He led a host of captives to Heaven.**

Jesus descended to the dead for us, and ascended into Heaven with us.

***Ephesians 4:8-10 -- 8 Therefore it says, "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men." 9 (In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? 10 He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)***

Paul here is referencing Psalm 68. This psalm is about God rescuing His people from Sheol. Israel's king is described as fighting on behalf of his people. He goes out to battle and his enemies flee. God will bring his people back from the depths of the seas, and ascend with them back to His holy mountain. This is the language and message of Psalm 68. Paul uses this to describe the work of Christ. Notice that after he descended into the lower regions, he came back with a host of captives that he ascended on high with. This is not insignificant. This is describing the work of Christ in his descent to rescue the people of God into the presence of God.

The Scriptures teach that we are united to Christ in his resurrection and ascension (Ephesians 2:5-6). His death, descent, resurrection, and ascension opens up the gates of Heavens for His people. This now takes us back to my opening quote: "Hades is impossible to escape. And heaven is impossible to enter. But Christ has broken the gates of Hades and opened wide the gates of heaven."

Because Jesus is the one who descended and ascended, the work of redemption is complete. We now have access to God, not just now in this life, but in death. When we pass from this life, and enter into eternal life, we do not go to Sheol. Heaven's gates have been opened wide through the finished work of Jesus. We now have Heaven as our home. We are now citizens of Heaven. We know that for the Christian, absence from the body means being in the presence of the Lord. All of this is because Jesus descended to the dead, and set the captives free. He bound the strong man. He proclaimed his victory. And he led a host of captives to Heaven. Hallelujah! What a Savior!