

PREFACE

At first I thought I might deal with the question Beth raised last week about Jesus “descending into hell” at His death as an aside, or even just printing the answer in a handout. But because there is much misinformation and misinterpretation on this, I decided it was worth our time to clear it up in class. We will also look at the evidence for the physical appearance of Christ after the resurrection, which we also discussed last week.

[I am indebted to Wayne Grudem’s *Systematic Theology* for the following]

“DESCENDED INTO HELL”**TRUE ORIGIN OF THE PHRASE**

My guess is that most of us (as was demonstrated in our discussion last week) think that Scripture teaches that Jesus “descended into hell.” That phrase, however, is not found in God’s word; it is from the (so-called) *Apostle’s Creed*.

The first half of the *Apostle’s Creed*

1. I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth:
2. And in Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son, our Lord:
3. Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary:
4. Suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, dead and buried:

He descended into hell:

5. The third day he rose again from the dead:
6. He ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty:

The *Apostle’s Creed* was not written or approved by a single church council, but gradually took shape from about AD 200 to 750. This phrase was added only late in this period and, as Grudem points out, “its origins, where they can be found, are far from praiseworthy.” Before AD 650 the phrase in the text meant only that Jesus was buried—i.e., “descended into the grave.”

POSSIBLE SUPPORTING PASSAGES

Some believe there are five passages in Scripture that suggest, or imply, that Jesus *did* descend into hell after His death, and we will look briefly at each of these.

Acts 2:27**Read Acts 2:27**

We needn’t spend much time with this, since we examined it in our last session. The KJV—“leave my soul in hell”—is not the best translation, because the word is not hell but “hades”—which can just mean the grave or death (the state of being dead). Jesus certainly *did* die, but this verse does not mean that he went to hell.

Romans 10:6-7**Read Romans 10:6-7.**

As with all of these, Grudem goes into deeper detail, and I would refer you to his book for those details (pages 587-594). Here I will give you just the essential punchline.

Paul here uses the word “deep” (abyssos) as a contrast to “heaven” in order to give the sense of a place that is unreachable, inaccessible to human beings. The contrast is not, “Who shall go to find Christ in a place of great blessing (heaven) or a place of great punishment (hell)?” but rather, “Who shall go to find Christ in a place that is inaccessibly high (heaven) or in a place that is inaccessible low (the deep, or the realm of death)?” No clear affirmation or denial of a “descent into hell” can be found in this passage.

Ephesians 4:8-9

I will defer this passage for the moment, because we are going to be examining it in the context of our next step in OT prophecy: Christ’s ascension. But, of course, it too is rejected as proof that Christ descended into hell.

1 Peter 3:18-20

Read 1 Peter 3:18-20 [not NASB].

This is a complicated, mysterious passage that is worthy of deeper analysis. But our purpose here is simply to examine each of these passages to see how, if at all, they pertain to the period during Christ’s death. Again, here (after two pages of discussion in his book) is Grudem’s bottom line:

The most satisfactory explanation of 1 Peter 3:19-20 [is] one proposed long ago by Augustine: the passage refers not to something Christ did between His death and resurrection, but to what He did “in the spiritual realm of existence” (or “through the Spirit”) *at the time of Noah*. When Noah was building the ark, Christ “in spirit” was preaching through Noah to the hostile unbelievers around him.

This interpretation fits comfortably in the context of 1 Peter 3—what Peter is saying—and is reflected in the NASB translation of v19: “in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits *now* in prison”.

1 Peter 4:6

Read 1 Peter 4:6 [not NIV].

Again we are not doing justice to this challenging text, but here is the bottom line: If this verse means that Christ went into hell and preached the gospel to those who had died, it would be the only passage in the Bible that teaches a “second chance” for salvation after death. Similar to the explanation for 1 Peter 3:19, Grudem explains that

“The dead” are people who have died and are now dead, even though they were alive and on earth when the gospel was preached to them.

Correspondingly, the NIV translates this “the gospel was preached even to those who are *now* dead,” and the NASB includes a margin note for the word “preached” (“i.e., preached in their lifetimes”).

EVIDENCE IN OPPOSITION

Three things Christ Jesus said from the cross point us *away from* the idea that He “descended into hell.”

“*Today you will be with Me in Paradise*” (Luke 23:43)

This implies that after Jesus died (the same day) His soul or spirit went immediately to the presence of the Father in heaven, even though His body remained on earth and was buried.

“*It is finished*” (John 19:30)

This strongly suggests that Christ’s suffering was finished at that moment and so was His alienation from the Father because of bearing our sin. This implies that He would not descend into hell, but would go at once into the Father’s presence.

“*Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit*” (Luke 23:46)

This also suggests that Christ expected (correctly) the immediate end of His suffering and estrangement and the welcoming of His spirit into heaven by God the Father. Note Stephen’s similar cry in Acts 7:59.

They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!”

CONCLUSION

These texts indicate, then, that Christ in His death experienced the same things believers in this present age experience when they die: His dead body remained on earth and was buried (as ours will be), but His spirit (or soul) passed immediately into the presence of God in heaven (just as ours will). Then on the first Easter morning, Christ’s spirit was reunited with His body and He was raised from the dead—just as Christians who have died will (when Christ returns) be reunited to their bodies and raised in their perfect resurrection bodies to new life.

HIS RESURRECTED APPEARANCE

FIRST FRUITS

Now let’s examine the answer to our other discussion last week regarding the physical appearance of Christ after he rose from the grave. That is, what was His—and, by extension, what will be our—resurrected form?

[And, once again, I have relied on *Systematic Theology* by Wayne Grudem]

Read 1 Corinthians 15:20, 23.

As Pastor Jeremy pointed out at Jeb’s funeral, yes, Lazarus was raised from the dead, *but he would die again*. He would still be subject to physical weakness and aging, and ultimately die a second time.

But when Jesus rose from the grave He did so as a new *kind* of human life—a life with a perfect body, no longer subject to weakness, aging, or death—an eternal *physical* body.

PHYSICAL

So what sort of body did the risen Jesus have? In 1 Corinthians Paul states that it was a *spiritual* body, but this does not mean it was immaterial.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:42-44.

spiritual = *pneumatikos* = “suited to and responsive to the guidance of the Spirit,” not nonphysical, but “consistent with the character and activity of the Holy Spirit”—“a physical body raised to the degree of perfection for which God originally intended it.”

Jesus went out of His way to demonstrate that His was a real *physical* body.

Matthew 28:9 His disciples took hold of His feet

Luke 24:15-18, 28-29 the Emmaus road disciples took Him for just another traveler

Luke 24:30 He took bread and broke it

John 20:27 invited Thomas to touch Him

And just after the Emmaus road event, Luke describes the dramatic scene when the two disciples had joined the other eleven and were telling them all about what had happened. Jesus suddenly appeared to all the disciples.

Read Luke 24:36-43.

WAS JESUS RECOGNIZABLE?

The quick answer is yes.

- Luke explicitly tells us that regarding the disciples on the Emmaus road, “their eyes were prevented from recognizing Him.”
- Mary Magdalene did not immediately know it was Jesus at the tomb, but it was probably still dark, and she was not at first looking directly at Him.
- On a number of occasions the disciple recognized Him rather quickly

We can conclude that there was, as Grudem puts it, “a considerable degree of continuity” between the risen Jesus and His earlier appearance. Yet he admits that Jesus probably did not look exactly the same as before—and he points out something I hadn’t thought of before.

Perhaps that difference in appearance was simply the difference between a man who had lived a life of suffering, hardship, and grief, and one whose body was restored to its full youthful appearance of perfect health.

DID JESUS WALK THROUGH WALLS?

The quick answer is maybe; we don’t know.

Under close examination none of the post-resurrection occurrences depend on that ability, and nowhere in the NT does it explicitly state that He did. Nonetheless, He is God; no doubt if He wanted to, He could have. The Bible just does not say He did.

As the “first fruits,” the risen Jesus was a living, breathing, eating demonstration of what every believer would become upon Christ’s return.