

I Believe

*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.
(Genesis 1:1 ESV)*

*And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.
(Hebrews 11:6 ESV)*

*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God,
that you may know that you have eternal life.
(1 John 5:13 ESV)*

He Descended To Hell

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Acts 2:22-36

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Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you I would love for you to open it now to Acts 2:22-36 – we’ll be coming back to that in just a minute. Today we are exploring the statement that Jesus descended into hell. This is one of the TWO LINES that some modern day North American evangelicals struggle with in the Apostles’ Creed.

But you should hear the words that I just used in that sentence – particularly the words “modern day” and the words “North American.” Because by and large this doctrine has not been a struggle for Christians anywhere other than here and any time other than now.

But it is a struggle for some of us so we are going to begin this morning by dealing with some PRE-EXEGETICAL QUESTIONS. I think we have to hit at least two. The first one is this:

Is This An Evangelical Doctrine?

Well, in a sense, it doesn’t really matter if this is an evangelical doctrine, it matters whether this is a Biblical doctrine. I trust you would all agree that if we found something in the Bible that

contradicted or corrected a cherished evangelical value – we would side with the Bible against our cherished evangelical value – would you say amen to that?

Amen!

I'll be honest with you – I think there are a few North American Evangelical values that need to be adjusted by further study of Holy Scripture – but that's a sermon for another day.

As to our question here – is this an evangelical doctrine – I think the answer has to be “generally, yes”. There are a few evangelical voices who have found this doctrine embarrassing – and who have suggested taking it out of the Creed but generally speaking the more representative evangelical approach would be like that of a scholar such as Albert Mohler, who is the President of the Southern Baptist Seminary. I would characterize his approach as “minimalistic”. He says:

“This short statement in the creed reminds us that Jesus, having truly died, was in what both the Old and New Testaments describe as the realm of the dead. The Hebrew word from the Old Testament is *sheol*, and the Greek word from the New Testament is *hades*. In both cases this refers to the temporary realm of the dead who are awaiting final judgment.”¹

His chapter on this line in the creed is intentionally brief - and he goes on to tell us why that is, he says:

“The brevity of this chapter is just an affirmation that we are to believe all that the Bible teaches – and resist the temptation to go further.”²

That's what I mean by minimalism – and I think that's a wise approach. Justin Bass, who received his PhD from Dallas Theological Seminary and who teaches New Testament at Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary takes a very similar approach, he says:

“Regardless of how imaginative the understanding of the *Descensus* becomes in the later centuries, the historical core of threefold purpose of Christ's descent: preaching, releasing the

¹ R. Albert Mohler, *The Apostles' Creed: Discovering Authentic Christianity In An Age Of Counterfeits*, (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2019), 89.

² R. Albert Mohler, *The Apostles' Creed: Discovering Authentic Christianity In An Age Of Counterfeits*, (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2019), 89.

saints of the Old Testament, and triumphant defeat of Death and Hades is one of the best attested Christian doctrines from the second century.”³

So, YES, it is an evangelical doctrine and more than that, it is a doctrine that has been believed and taught in the Christian church for a very long time. But as the comments by Justin Bass clearly indicate – it is a doctrine that has endured some exaggeration and some creative imagination along the way – and that leads us to our SECOND PRE-EXEGETICAL question:

Why Do Some Modern Evangelicals Struggle With This Doctrine?

I think there are two reasons, and the first one we’ve already alluded to. Some modern-day evangelicals struggle with this doctrine:

1. Because of certain exaggerations and imaginative additions

The doctrine of Christ’s descent captivated the medieval mind and attracted all manner of speculation and creative excess – not unlike what we’ve seen in the last 30 years in America with respect to the doctrine of eschatology. What one generation obsesses over – the next generation is embarrassed by. And there were lots of imaginative and generally unhelpful things added to the core biblical doctrine of Christ’s descent in the middle ages. Some of those additions were speculative and some of them were spurious and even heretical. Some in the Eastern church for example began to teach a universalist interpretation – the idea that ALL PEOPLE will be saved – because Christ has broken and defeated hell. “He shattered the gates and therefore anyone now can leave who wants to.”

But that isn’t what the Bible says – and early Christians were very carefully to make clear that JUST AS THE CROSS is only effective for those who believe – SO ALSO THE DESCENT. Jesus didn’t break ALL THE PRISONERS FREE – only those who were waiting for him in faith.

Matthew Emerson of Oklahoma Baptist University is helpful here, he says:

³ Justin Bass, *The Battle For The Keys* (Great Britain: Paternoster, 2014), 11.

“Christians in the first four centuries of the church were careful to clarify that Christ’s descent is only liberating for the faithful. They did not affirm a postmortem second chance for salvation upon Christ’s descent, and they explicitly denied that Christ’s descent saved all those in Hades.”⁴

So – over the centuries – this doctrine was the subject of some abuse and exaggeration – but that is not a reason to abandon it, it is a reminder of the need to be cautious and circumspect when teaching it.

The second reason why some evangelicals struggle with this doctrine has to do with cultural distance.

2. Because of cultural distance

We are a long way removed from what first century Jewish people believed about death and the afterlife. For 2000 years we’ve been celebrating a NEW and GLORIOUS REALITY. But we have forgotten that it is NEW. It is the air WE breathe – it is the reality WE assume. But it has not always been that way.

We believe that to be absent from the body – IS TO BE PRESENT WITH THE LORD – amen?

Amen!!

But to be clear, that is not what first century Jewish believers understood or experienced.

Ask yourself this question: what happened to Daniel when he died?

Was it true for Daniel that to be absent from the body was to be present with the Lord?

No, it was not and modern day, North American evangelicals have forgotten that.

In the Old Testament – before the death, burial, descent, and resurrection of Jesus Christ – when you died your body went into the grave and your soul descended to the realm of the dead. Old

⁴ Matthew Emerson, *He Descended To The Dead* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2019), 77.

Testament believers conceived of a 3 tiered chamber of the dead – called Sheol or in Greek Hades. There was a compartment for the souls of the faithful, there was another compartment for the souls of the wicked and there was a lower compartment that served as a prison for fallen angels.

So when Daniel – or Jacob – or any Old Testament believer other than Enoch, Moses and Elijah – the three exceptions – when any other Old Testament saint DIED his or her soul went to Sheol – Hades – not to the place of torment – but to the place the Jews referred to as “Abraham’s Bosom” or “Abraham’s Side”. It was the place where all the true children of Abraham waited in faith and hope of resurrection.

They couldn’t immediately enter the Presence of God – there was that pesky old FLAMING ANGELIC SWORD thing from the end of Genesis 3 – barring the way back to God’s Presence. So they couldn’t go there, but neither did they go to the place of torment – because they were, after all, people who had faith in God. So they went to the place of waiting.

The best way to illustrate this is simply to remind you of what Jesus said when he told the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus. Do you remember that? Lazarus though a poor man in life, was a faithful believer, whereas the rich man was not a believer. Jesus tells the story this way, he says:

The poor man died and was carried by the angels to **Abraham’s side**. The rich man also died and was buried,²³ and in Hades, **being in torment**, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side.²⁴ And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.’²⁵ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish.’²⁶ And besides all this, **between us and you a great chasm has been fixed**, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and **none may cross from there to us**.’ (Luke 16:22–26 ESV)

Notice that neither man is carried into heaven when he dies. Jesus is assuming the first century Jewish understanding of and experience of life after death. A faithful person will go and wait at Abraham’s side – he will be gathered to his fathers, as it were – whereas a wicked man will immediately begin to experience torment. Notice also that they can communicate – they are

aware of each other – but they cannot cross from one compartment to the other. There are no second chances after death.

That, in a nutshell, is the Old Testament reality of life after death. It was about waiting in the realm of the dead – albeit waiting differently depending upon one’s faith in the person and work of God.

That’s what DEATH was LIKE for believers before Jesus – and as I said, we are a long way – thankfully – from that reality and that’s one of the reasons why we struggle to remember why the early Christians were so delighted with this doctrine – but they were and we need to rediscover why – and that is our task for this morning.

So with all of that PRE-EXEGETICAL work out of the way – let’s go now and read the text for ourselves. We’ll start with the first and arguably the most important mention of this doctrine in Peter’s sermon on the Day of Pentecost. Hear now the Word of the Lord beginning at verse 22 of Acts 2:

“Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—²³ this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.²⁴ God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.

²⁵ For David says concerning him, “I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand that I may not be shaken;

²⁶ therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; my flesh also will dwell in hope.

²⁷ For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One see corruption.

²⁸ You have made known to me the paths of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence.’

²⁹ “Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day.³⁰ Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne,³¹ he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption.

³² This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses.³³ Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise

of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing.

³⁴ For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, ““The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand,

³⁵ until I make your enemies your footstool.””

³⁶ Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.” (Acts 2:22–36 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

The Doctrine Of Christ’s Descent

So the first thing we want to say about this doctrine, rooted in the teaching of this text is that:

1. Jesus descended into Hades

Now, you will notice that I am not using the word “hell” even though that word is in the Creed as we’ve been reciting it, rather I am using the word as the ESV translates it as “hades”. There is a reason for that. Originally when the Creed was translated into English it made sense to translate Hades as Hell. The words at that time were roughly equivalent. So for example, in the KJV version of Peter’s sermon the climactic line in verse 32 reads:

“his soul was not left in hell” (Acts 2:31 KJV)

Whereas the ESV has it:

“he was not abandoned to Hades” (Acts 2:31 ESV)

In recent years the word “hell” has become associated with the place of torment and so now, most modern English versions will say that Jesus descended to the dead – to Hades - to avoid any suggestion that Jesus suffered additional torments as part of his descent. It is very important that we don’t accidentally imply that. When Jesus died on the cross he said:

“It is finished” (John 19:30 ESV)

So there was nothing further for him to pay in hell – on the cross Jesus PAID IT ALL.

The descent for Jesus was not about torment it was about triumph!

Jesus went down to the place of the dead – but as Peter declares – he did not STAY there – the Lord did not ABANDON his soul to Hades.

That’s the second thing we see in this text:

2. Jesus departed from Hades

Peter says:

“he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption.” (Acts 2:31 ESV)

So Jesus’ visit to Hades was a SHORT ONE. He went down – he defeated Death and Hades – he broke the chains and set the captives free – he proclaimed his victory - and he departed, bringing many captives in his train. The Apostle Paul says that – also quoting David – in Ephesians 4:8:

Therefore it says, “When he ascended on high **he led a host of captives**, and he gave gifts to men.” (Ephesians 4:8 ESV)

So Jesus went down and Jesus came up – leading a host of captives, praise the Lord!

The third thing we can say here is that:

3. Jesus defeated Death and Hades

That is certainly implied in Peter’s sermon, but the fullest expression of that part of the doctrine comes to us in the Book of Revelation. Flip forward in your Bibles now to Revelation 1:17-18. In this passage, the Apostle John is describing a vision he had of the ascended Christ. He says:

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.** (Revelation 1:17–18 ESV)

I love what William Hendriksen says here, he says:

“Hades was not able to hold the Son of man. He arose gloriously and now has authority over death and Hades, and from their terrors He is able to deliver believers, through the power of His resurrection.”⁵

Isn't that great?!

Like all truly human beings at that time, when Jesus died his disembodied human soul descended to the realm of the dead. But death could not hold him – the grave could not keep him. By virtue of his perfect, sinless life and by the exercise of his authority as the obedient Son of Man, he was able to leave whenever he wanted to and he was able to take with him all those who were waiting for him in covenant faith.

That is the fullness and the glory of the Christian gospel – and you have been singing about that whether you know it or not. I remember singing as a boy:

“Up from the grave he arose, with a mighty triumph o'er his foes! He arose victorious from the dark domain, and he lives forever with his saints to reign. He arose! He arose! Hallelujah! Christ arose!”⁶

Do you sing that here? We used to. I took that out of the old Red Baptist Hymn Book.

Do you remember the third verse?

“Death cannot keep his prey, Jesus, my Saviour! He tore the bars away, Jesus my Lord! – Up from the grave he arose, with a mighty triumph over his foes...”

⁵ William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 57.

⁶ Low In The Grave He Lay, Robert Lowry. Red Baptist Hymn Book, #116.

The point is – we used to celebrate this doctrine and we ought to celebrate this doctrine again. It's in the Bible – not everything SAID about this doctrine is in the Bible – but it is in the Bible and it does matter.

Let's take our last couple of minutes and talk about why that is.

Why Does This Doctrine Matter?

The doctrine of the descent matters first of all because:

1. It makes Jesus the Saviour of Old Testament saints

You've heard me say many times, that everyone in the Bible – everyone in the history of the universe – who has ever been saved has been saved by the person and work of Jesus Christ – will you say amen to that?

Amen.

Jesus is your Saviour no more and no less than he was the Saviour of Daniel or Noah in the Old Testament. They were saved by grace through faith just like we are – the only difference is that they were believing FORWARD whereas we are believing BACKWARDS. We look BACKWARDS on all that God did in Christ for our salvation and we BELIEVE in that and are saved. Daniel and Noah and Abraham and Jacob – they were saved by looking FORWARD to what God would do through Jesus Christ – they didn't know his name would be Jesus – but they knew that a child would come, born of a woman, who would defeat our enemy and bring us home to the celestial city.

That's the whole point of the Faith Hall Of Fame Chapter in the Book of Hebrews. In Hebrews 11 it says, talking about Abraham:

For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. (Hebrews 11:10 ESV)

That is Old Testament faith!! It was forward looking! But when the Old Testament saints DIED – they did not precede us into heaven. There was something in the future – for them – that still had to be accomplished. The Apostle tells us that in verse 13:

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar (Hebrews 11:13 ESV)

So they SAW a future with God – they believed that he would do something to bridge the gap and bring them home – but they didn't actually RECEIVE THAT. They died in faith and they SAW it from afar. The Apostle says at the end of the chapter:

And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised,⁴⁰ since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect. (Hebrews 11:39–40 ESV)

So they had to wait for us – they did not precede us into perfection. J.I. Packer says here, in his chapter on the doctrine of the descent of Christ:

“He perfected the spirits of Old Testament believers (Hebrews 12:23; 11:40), bringing them out of the gloom that Sheol, “the pit”, had hitherto been for them into this same Paradise experience.”⁷

So Jesus descended into Sheol – or Hades – so that he could depart from there WITH the souls of the Old Testament saints and bring them into the same blessed experience of death that we now enjoy. Thus Jesus is as much the Saviour of Noah as he is of us – thanks be to God!

The second reason that this doctrine is so important is that:

2. It radically and eternally transforms our experience of death

We've talked about how the descent of Jesus allowed the Old Testament saints to experience what we now experience when we die in faith – but what is that experience? Let's talk about that for just a minute.

⁷ J.I. Packer, *Affirming The Apostles' Creed*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 88.

According to the Apostle Paul – to be absent from the body now is to be present with the Lord!!! That phrase which we all know and love, actually comes from the old King James Version of 2 Corinthians 5:8 which says:

“We are confident, *I say*, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord.” (2 Corinthians 5:8 KJV)

That is the Christian hope! When you die – if you die in faith – then your body will be laid in the grave and your SPIRIT will go to be with Jesus! That is glorious! That is marvellous! But that was not the experience of Old Testament saints when they died. That hope was a long way off for them. But because of Christ – because of his obedient life, because of his substitutionary death, because of his victorious descent and because of his glorious ascension – they too have gone to wait with Jesus – and WE GO TO BE WITH THEM AND HIM – as we likewise wait for the return of Jesus to the earth and the general resurrection of all people followed by our BODILY experience of the eternal kingdom – thanks be to God!

So to be clear – if you leave here today, in faith – and get hit by a bus on your way home, your body will be laid in the grave and your spirit will ascend into heaven there to enjoy the presence of Jesus and the fellowship of the saints – Old Testament and New – as you WAIT for the return of Jesus to the earth and the general resurrection of the dead. So – you do not IMMEDIATELY receive your resurrection body. People say that at funerals all the time but it is not true. They say: “Well I know Uncle Frank will be up there enjoying his new body and hitting a few golf balls off the tee with Jesus.”

Well, that’s not true.

Uncle Frank is certainly in heaven – if he was a believer – but he does not yet have his new resurrection body. According to the Bible Uncle Frank is around the throne of God and has been:

“given a white robe and told to rest a little longer” (Revelation 6:11 ESV)

So he is not a naked soul – he has been given a white robe – some sort of temporary covering – but Uncle Frank’s REAL HOPE – his ULTIMATE EXPECTATION – is to be resurrected into a new, heavenly BODY in which he will enjoy Christ as King in the new heavens and the new earth FOREVER.

So it is glorious time of waiting now for the believing dead – as opposed to the dark and gloomy wait, that once it was.

That is why the Apostle Paul said:

“O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?”

⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:55–57 ESV)

Death is no longer something to be FEARED, Paul says. Rather for the Christian, it is something almost to be MOCKED. Athanasius, in the fourth century said:

“If you see children playing with a lion, don’t you know that the lion must be either dead or completely powerless? In the same way ... when you see Christ’s believers playing with death and despising it, there can be no doubt that death has been destroyed by Christ and that its corruption has been dissolved and brought to an end.”⁸

That’s what death is now for the Christian: A dead lion. A trophy reminding us of the victory of our God through Jesus Christ. Because of him – and because of this doctrine - we can be sure:

that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers,³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38–39 ESV)

That is the Gospel! That is the GOOD NEWS – and all God’s people said – AMEN! Amen! And thanks be to God! Let’s pray together.

⁸ Athanasius, as cited in Ben Myers, *The Apostles’ Creed: A Guide To The Ancient Catechism*, (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2018), 84.