

With Me In Paradise

23:39 One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!”

40 But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?”

41 And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.”

42 And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

43 And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

Luke 23:39-43

Virgil and Dante

“Let us go,” said Virgil, “for the long way presses on us.” So he sent himself and so I was made to enter into the first circle that rings **the abyss**. That place, according to my hearing, did not have tears but rather sighs that made the eternal air tremble; these came from a sadness without punishment that those crowds had, which were many and great with souls of infants and of women and of men.

My good master [said] to me: “You do not ask what spirits these are, which you see? ... but if they were before

Christianity, they did not worship god as they ought; and of such as these am I myself ...”

A great sadness seized my heart when I understood him, because I knew people of great worth that were suspended in that limbo. “Tell me, my master, tell me, lord ... did any one ever leave here, either through their own merit or through another’s, that then was saved?”

And that one, when he understood my covert speech, replied: “I was new in this state, when I saw a powerful one enter here, crowned with a sign of victory. He took from here the shade of the first parent, of Abel his son and that of Noah, of Moses lawmaker and obedient one; the patriarch Abraham and David the king, Israel with his father and his siblings and with Rachel, for whom he did so much, and many others, and made them beatified. And I want you to know that, before these, no human spirits were saved.”

(Dante, *Inferno* Canto 4.22-63)¹

Thus writes Dante in his famous *Inferno*, as he begins his journey through the various circles of hell with his guide Virgil, the “noble pagan,” leading him forward.

¹ Tom Simone, “Introduction,” in *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Florentine by Birth, but Not by Character: Canticle One, Inferno*, trans. Tom Simone (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2007), 46–47.

Older is Sometimes Better: Calvin and the Creed

Generally speaking, a great rule of thumb for doctrinal truth is whether the idea is **old or new**. If a teaching comes along that has never been heard before, then we should be skeptical going into it. This doesn't necessitate that it is wrong, but it should cause us to wonder why it took 2,000 years to be seen if it has only been stated for the first time recently.²

But there's a catch here. That is, it seems to me that this rule should have been true as much 500 or 1000 years ago as it should be today. Curiously, this is one of the charges that Rome has leveled against the Reformation, especially as it regards doctrines like the five *Solas*. **They say that these were novel doctrines** that no one had ever believed before. But this is precisely why the Reformers went to great pains to show that their doctrines were held by the Church Fathers, even though their foundational principle was *Scripture*

² In my humble opinion, a great example of this is my argument for baptism. My whole point was root a credobaptist argument for baptism in the OT covenants. But I tried very hard to root all the pieces in the Church Fathers, even though I believe my argument is itself quite unique. See **Douglas Van Dorn**, *Waters of Creation: A Biblical-Theological Study of Baptism* (Erie, CO: Waters of Creation Pub., 2009). Also, Douglas Van Dorn, "The Old Testament, Covenantal Roots of Baptism, [Part I](#) and [Part II](#)," academia.com.

Alone—a doctrine also held by the Fathers.³ I agree with the Reformers that they were not novel, not merely because I believe they are biblical (and frankly, the Bible does trump all else), but because others did in fact teach them. No, they weren't presented *in the same way*, but why should we expect that they would be?

Into this, I want us to consider a doctrine that *should* arise from our text today, and in long days past *did* arise from it. It is a doctrine that is hinted at on more than one occasion by Luke already in his Gospel. It is a doctrine that teaches us **something of the tremendous power** of Jesus against the Evil One, and therefore it has massive ramifications for all people today. Yet, it has been **forgotten, neglected, and changed** over the centuries such that it has become barely recognizable, if even tolerated any more.

Indeed, ironically, much of the Reformed tradition, people who went to such pains to prove the antiquity of their theology, has either **changed the doctrine** completely or **even dropped it from the ecumenical creed altogether** (this was not true of the Lutherans). For example, a pastor I've met several times at conferences tells us, "**When I came**

³ I give some examples in **Douglas Van Dorn**, *Five Solas of the Reformation* (Dacono, CO: Waters of Creation, 2019), Appendix 2.

to my present church, I found that they had abandoned this line in the Creed (which, I understand was a fairly widespread omission among Southern Presbyterians). On studying the matter, I agreed to continue this omission.”⁴ This doctrine is stated in the Apostle’s Creed as, “... *He descended into hell.*”

Now, I do think it is important to say that “*he descended into hell*” is only found in the Apostles’ Creed (not the Nicene or Athanasian or Roman Symbol), so I will cut a little slack here. Nevertheless, it troubles me when men have no problems just chopping a thing out of an ecumenical creed, as that kind of defeats the whole point of the church universally believing it!⁵ *Especially when you read the reasoning.* For example, the brother above gives the following argument. 1. The Creed very obviously teaches a chronological order to Jesus’ life. In the Creed, the order is, “*conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under*

⁴ Rick Phillips, “[Three Reasons to Omit the Descent Line from the Apostles’ Creed](#),” *The Aquila Report* (Jan 5, 2015).

⁵ This gets tricky on multiple levels here. For example, the Orthodox do not use the Apostle’s Creed. The Creed as we have it today is quite late (3rd – 7th century), the “descent” clause isn’t found in it until Rufinus at the turn of the 5th (though, Rufinus is also one of our earliest sources for the Creed). Nor is it found in any of the older creeds of the Fathers. However, the *doctrine* very much is found in those Fathers and unlike the Filóque Clause of the Nicene Creed which did not have the Eastern churches’ approval, this clause never created a controversy of being anti-ecumenical. Also, the East very much agrees with the doctrine, as do Lutherans, Anglicans. Furthermore, many Presbyterians and Baptists also use the Apostles’ Creed.

Pontius Pilate, was crucified, *dead and buried. He descended into hell. On the third day he rose again from the dead.*” Very obviously, the Creed teaches that the descent to hell happened *after* he died.⁶ But he then adds, 2. This is not the Reformed teaching. It is the Roman and Lutheran teaching. *Therefore*, to say this in the Creed is to affirm their doctrine, not the Reformed doctrine. Therefore, he won’t say it.

Now, he is very much correct that this is the Reformed teaching. We see what the Reformed have taught in the Heidelberg Catechism for example,

Question 44. Why is there added, “He descended into hell?”

Answer: That in my greatest temptations, I may be assured, and wholly comfort myself in this, that my Lord Jesus Christ, by his inexpressible anguish, pains, terrors, and hellish agonies, in which he was plunged during all his sufferings, but *especially on the cross*, has delivered me from the anguish and torments of hell.

Ursinus in the Catechism gets this from John Calvin. In the *Institutes* Calvin begins,

⁶ The long quote below from Calvin ends, “Those who—on the ground that it is absurd to put after his burial what preceded it—say that the order is reversed in this way are making a very trifling and ridiculous objection.” No argument, just poo-pooing it. This was not Calvin’s greatest moment.

But we ought not to omit his descent into hell, a matter of no small moment in bringing about redemption ... In setting forth a summary of doctrine a place must be given to it, as it contains the useful and not-to-be-despised mystery of a most important matter ... It reflected the common belief of all the godly; for there is no one of the fathers who does not mention in his writings Christ's descent into hell ... If any persons have scruples about admitting this article into the Creed, it will soon be made plain how important it is to the sum of our redemption: if it is left out, much of the benefit of Christ's death will be lost.

(**Calvin**, *Institutes* 2.16.8)

But then he begins to explain what he thinks it means:

If Christ had died only a bodily death, it would have been ineffectual. No—it was expedient at the same time for him to undergo the severity of God's vengeance, to appease his wrath and satisfy his just judgment ... [As Scripture says], “The chastisement of our peace was laid upon him,” “he was wounded for our transgressions” and “he was bruised for our infirmities” [Isa. 53:5]. By these words he means that Christ was put in place of evildoers as surety and pledge—submitting himself even as the accused—to bear and suffer

all the punishments that they ought to have sustained. All— with this one exception: “He could not be held by the pangs of death” [Acts 2:24] ... The point is that the Creed sets forth what Christ suffered in the sight of men, and then [appropriately] speaks of that invisible and incomprehensible judgment which he underwent in the sight of God in order that we might know not only that Christ’s body was given as the price of our redemption, but that he paid a greater and more excellent price in suffering in his soul the terrible torments of a condemned and forsaken man. No wonder, then, if he is said to have descended into hell, for he suffered the death that God in his wrath had inflicted upon the wicked!

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(Calvin, *Institutes* 2.16.10)

Calvin’s teaching is therefore that Jesus “descended into hell” *on the cross*, while *he was alive*, suffering both the affliction of men and being forsaken of God. But, he did not die *and descend to hell*, citing Acts 2:24, “God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.”⁸ This, he calls a “childish” “story” (2.16.9)

⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* & 2, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 512–516.

or you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One see corruption” (Acts 2:27).

wrongly taken from **Psalm 107:16** and **Zechariah 9:11**, both of which speak of Israel being taken into Babylon, not of OT saints being delivered from Hades, although he does admit that **1Pet 3:19** does have something to do with the OT saints in Hades somehow being made to realize that Christ had finally died for them.

Two things can be said. **First**, I have **zero doubt that Calvin is right** that Jesus suffered in such a way on the cross. Nor is this in itself even a new idea. And he is right, this has profound implications for each of us. But that isn't our focus this time around. The **second** point is that Calvin is literally the first person in church history to say that this is what *the Apostles' Creed* meant by this line. As one scholar has said, Calvin's teaching here is "**virtually unattested**" and "**entirely novel**" in church history.⁹ And this takes me back to where I began. Someone 500 years ago should have said that this was a novel interpretation and put a stop to it right there. But it won't do for us to say, "**This is the Reformed interpretation,**" when that interpretation was itself utterly novel in all of church history. We don't worship tradition. We hold to Scripture alone. There is a better way forward.

⁹ **Matthew Emerson**, *"He Descended to the Dead": An Evangelical Theology of Holy Saturday* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: 2019), 99, 100.

“With Me In Paradise”

What does any of this have to do with **our passage**? Let’s look at the text. As Jesus is hanging on the accursed tree, one of the criminals who hanged there with him mocked him, just like so many others were doing. “**Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!**” (**Luke 23:39**). This poor fool was under that blinding delusion that Messiah was going to usher in his kingdom through brute force and sheer power.

“**But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong’**” (**40-41**). The power of God through the visible proclamation of the cross was even at this very moment working in the man’s heart to make him the first **Theologian of the Cross**. And what a wonder, for this man was a criminal, hanging there to die because of his crimes that he had indeed committed. Criminals are not supposed to get stays of execution, but justice for those they have wronged. And he knows it. He admits it. But he nevertheless **turns to Jesus**, the first in all the story to do so, and in his last moments on earth says, “**Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom**” (**42**).

Jesus, turning his bloody swollen head to the man, takes as deep a breath as the suffocation torture device will allow him, pulls himself up in a terrible moment of sheer agony of his body—*just as he is undergoing the very thing Calvin says he was*, and offers him not merely forgiveness, but **his very presence**. “**Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise**” (43). These are the words that have generated so much controversy. This is where we find the descent into hell in our passage. But not everyone thinks so.

For example, John Piper has boldly stated, “**There is no textual basis for believing that Christ descended into hell. In fact, he said to the thief on the cross, ‘Today you will be with me in paradise.’ That's the only clue we have as to what Jesus was doing between death and resurrection. He said, ‘Today—this Friday afternoon, after we're both dead—you and I will be in paradise together.’ I don't think the thief went to hell and that hell is called paradise. I think he went to heaven and that Jesus was there with him.**”¹⁰ His friend, Wayne Grudem agrees, not only saying there is no Scripture, but that church history got it wrong (at least he admits what the Fathers actually taught). In his *Systematic Theology*, he simply **skips the**

¹⁰ **John Piper**, “Did Christ Ever Descend to Hell?” *Christian Post* (April 23, 2011), <https://www.christianpost.com/news/did-christ-ever-descend-to-hell.html>

phrase altogether saying, “The single argument in its favor seems to be the fact that it has been around so long. But an old mistake is still a mistake—and as long as it has been around there has been confusion and disagreement over its meaning.”¹¹

Unfortunately, there is very little, and in some cases, **no exegesis** dealing with any of the texts put forward as proof for the descent into hell and why they can’t mean what the church has said they mean. I’ve rarely seen anyone cite **Ps 107:16** or **Zech 9:11** for example, but that’s all Calvin will deal with. It should begin with our verse, but none of these men touch it, except perhaps to say that they don’t believe it. But that’s not exegesis, that’s incredulity. So in the remaining time, I want to look at **why the early church and the Apostles’ Creed believed what they believed**, defend the older view, and then leave us with some thoughts on why this matters.

“Paradise”

Let’s begin in our verse with “**Paradise.**” This is the key term. Most people these days simply interpret the word to mean “**heaven.**” Perhaps they get this from something like

¹¹ **Wayne A. Grudem**, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 2004), 594.

Paul's statement, "I know that this man was caught up *into paradise*" (2Cor 12:3). Paul seems to be speaking about himself, though we can't be certain. If so, it was most likely on one of the occasions when he was nearly stoned to death. He didn't know if he had died or was merely near death having a vision. But whatever the case, he says that he went to "paradise." The language is so close to that of just two verses earlier, "I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven" (2), that people have simply equated "paradise" with "heaven." *In this case, I have no problem with that.*

But does this mean that *all* paradises are heaven? Of course not. In Genesis 2:8, "The Lord God planted a garden in Eden." "Eden" is translated into Greek as *paradise* (*paradeison*). Eden wasn't in heaven, but on earth.

The word has different meanings. It can refer to an "en-closed park or pleasure-ground." The Greeks often used it this way. It can mean "a garden" or "orchard." This very clearly overlaps with Eden. It can also mean "the abode of the blessed."¹² In this case, Eden *or* Heaven could be in mind. So also could *other places*, if they were the abode of the blessed.

¹² Henry George Liddell et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 1308.

It is into this that we need to understand how the people in Jesus' day viewed the place we call "hell." We looked at this back in Luke 16, because in that story, Jesus very likely foreshadowed the very events beginning to unfold here on the cross, after he dies, and then going to his resurrection. Let's look at the old KJV, "And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into *Abraham's bosom*: the rich man also died, and was buried; And *in hell* he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom" (Luke 16:22-23). You can hear that the English "hell" is used here. This is the word *Hades* in Greek. Rather than giving it in English, the ESV chooses to transliterate it: *hades*.

What is "hell?" Etymologically, the word comes from the old English *hel*, *helle*, which in turn comes from the Proto-Germanic *haljō*, "the underworld." Hell is literally the "concealed place" from an even earlier Proto-Indo-European word *kel-* which means "to cover, conceal, save." Curiously, the Old Norse *hellir* means "cave, cavern," and this is precisely what Jesus is looking at when he tells Peter while standing at Pan's Grotto (Cave), that "the gates of hell will not be able to prevail against his church" (Matt 16:18), a text we'll come back to later.

Hel, helle meant “nether world, abode of the dead, infernal regions, place of torment for the wicked after death.”¹³ But those are *not* all the same thing. And that’s a huge problem with “hell” as an English word, which becomes even clearer when you realize that it translates not one, but *three* different Greek words. Not only do we translate *hades* as “hell,” we also translate *Gehenna* as “hell” and *Tartarus* as “hell.” And these are not the same thing.

While there were different conceptions of these places, *Gehenna* is usually thought of as the eternal lake of fire, sometimes residing in Hades, sometimes not. *Tartarus* is the deepest part of hell, a prison with bars of Adamantium, so strong that the angels who were consigned there in the days of Noah can’t get out. It is sometimes identified with *Gehenna* and sometimes not.

Hades, on the other hand, is the word the LXX always uses to translate “*Sheol*.” And what is *Sheol*? It is the OT place of the dead. Thus, as simply the unseen place, it is a good translation for *Sheol*. How many people went to *Sheol* in the OT? *Everyone*. Therefore, everyone went to Hades when they died. Didn’t matter if you were a believer or not,

¹³ All this comes from “[Hell \(n.\)](#),” *Etymology Online Dictionary*.

a pagan or a Jew, the highest saint, or the worst sinner. When Jacob thought Joseph was dead, he said, “No, I shall go down to Sheol [Hades/Hell] to my son, mourning” (Gen 37:35). Hezekiah said, “In the middle of my days I must depart; I am consigned to the gates of Sheol [Hades] for the rest of my years” (Isa 38:10). The Psalmist said, “What man can live and never see death? Who can deliver his soul from the power of Sheol [Hades]” (Psalm 89:48).



So does this mean everyone is going to a place of burning fire, suffering, weeping, gnashing of teeth? That isn't what Job seemed to think. "Oh that you would hide me in Sheol [Hades/Hell], that you would conceal me until your wrath be past, that you would appoint me a set time, and remember me" (Job 14:13)! The thing is, Sheol was considered a gigantic land under the earth. It was like a country. It had different parts to it; it wasn't all the same thing. Kind of like hell on earth is Nebraska, but heaven is Colorado (that joke used to work better when we were football rivals), but both are in America.

The farther back you go in the OT, the fuzzier Sheol seems to be. Isaiah does seem to speak of it as having compartments. In a verse that also predicts the resurrection of the saints, "Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a dew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead. Come, my people, *enter your chambers, and shut your doors behind you; hide yourselves for a little while until the fury has passed by*" (Isaiah 26:19-20).¹⁴ Much later, 4 Ezra (2Esdras) is similar, "In Hades *the chambers of the souls are like the*

¹⁴ Samuel Renihan. *Crux, Mors, Inferi: A Primer and Reader on Christ's Descent* (2021), 38-39. Kindle Edition.

womb. For just as a woman who is in travail makes haste to escape the pangs of birth, so also do these places hasten to give back those things that were committed to them from the beginning” (4Ezra 4:41-42).

By the time you get to the NT, there were vivid descriptions of it as having *different compartments, places*, etc.¹⁵ Josephus tells us that the Pharisees believed “that souls have an immortal vigor in them, and that *under the earth* there will be rewards or punishments, according as they have lived virtuously or viciously in this life; and the latter are to be *detained in an everlasting prison*, but that the former shall have *power to revive and live again*” (Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.1.3). Importantly, 4 Ezra also goes on to say, “Then the pit of torment shall appear, and opposite it shall be the place of rest; and the furnace of Hell [Gehenna] shall be disclosed, and opposite it *the Paradise of delight*” (4Ezra 7:36). Speaking of a place right there in sight of Gehenna, but opposite of it, it calls it “Paradise,” the very same word Jesus uses. But this is *not* in heaven. This is precisely what Jesus is talking about when he speaks of “Abraham’s Bosom” where Lazarus is

¹⁵ Cf. Richard Longnecker, “Grave, Sheol, Pit, Hades, Gehenna, Abaddon, Hell,” *Theological Wordbook of the Bible*, ed. Donald E. Gowan (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 188-90.

“comforted” (Luke 16:25). This is also parallel to Elysium in the Greek pagan conception. Dr. Shedd summarizes this, “

There was one *hadēs* for all, consisting of two subterranean divisions ... In the pagan scheme, hades is a general term having two special terms under it: Elysium and Tartarus. But in the ... Christian scheme, hades does double duty, being both a general and a special term. When the pagan is asked, “Of what does hades consist?” he answers, “Of Elysium and Tartarus.” But when the ... Christian is asked, “Of what does hades consist?” he must answer, “Of *paradise* and hades.”¹⁶

Tertullian (*Apology* 47.2-3, 12-13) believed that the Greeks got all this from the Jews rather than vice versa.

“Who among the poets, who among the sophists, has not drunk from the fountain of the prophets? From them the philosophers have slaked their thirst of mind; with the result that what they borrow from our books sets you comparing us with them ... whatever they stumbled on in the sacred digests they took it, they recast it to match the plan of their fancy, turned it to their own purposes ... If we raise the threat of Gehenna, which is a treasury of hidden fire for

¹⁶ William Greenough Thayer Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, ed. Alan W. Gomes, 3rd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub., 2003), 833.

punishment underground ... And if we name Paradise, a place of divine beauty, reserved for the reception of the spirits of the holy, kept from the knowledge of this common world by the fiery zone as it were by a wall,—the Elysian fields are before us in capturing belief.” (See also Gregory Nazianzen, Orat. 20. in laud. Basilii).

So you can see pretty easily that in fact there is a tradition of calling part of hades “paradise.” It doesn’t really matter if someone like Piper doesn’t think that’s true. It is what it is. He just hasn’t done his homework. That means that Jesus very easily could have been talking about *this place* as opposed to heaven. Like I said, Paradise isn’t just in heaven.

So what about that? Didn’t Jesus go to heaven? Well, sure he did. But *not before* he went to the place where everyone else went. Think about it. All men go went Hades when they died. Jesus was a man. Jesus died. Where else do you suppose he went? Only if you *presuppose* that hell necessitates a place of punishment would you deny outright the possibility that he went where everyone else went. But the Creed is not saying that Jesus *was punished* in hell. It simply says he *went* there. “He descended into hell.” Calvin’s problem, I

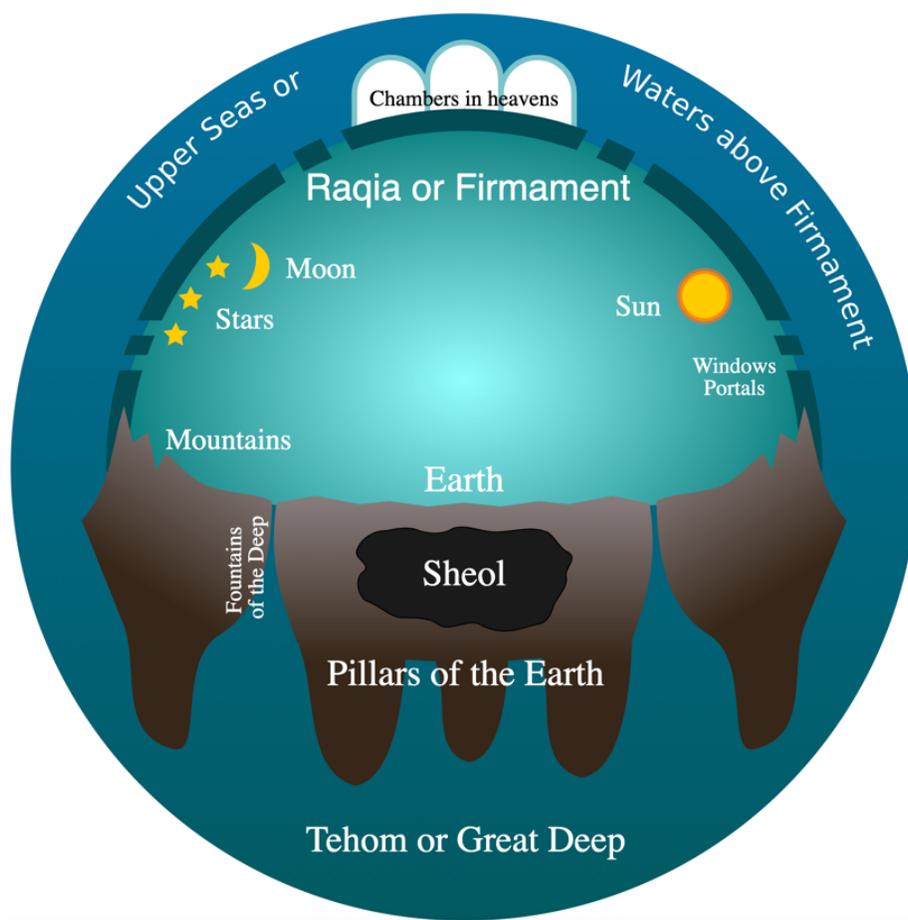
believe, is essentially reading hell to necessitate “punishment.” “He descended *into punishment*.” But that isn’t the idea at all. The idea is that **Jesus *went somewhere, not that he was punished somewhere***. When he died, he didn’t cease to exist. His spirit-soul went someplace. Where did it go? It went where everyone else went.

Further proof of this is that **the thief on the cross** was going to go somewhere when he died. Where would he have gone? The same place everyone else went—Sheol, Hades, Hell. How could he have gone to heaven? The resurrection hadn’t occurred yet. That doesn’t mean he was punished. For Jesus says that he went to the “**paradise**” part of it, not the fiery punishment part.

Proof of the Descent into Hell

Other than this one verse, is there any **proof that Jesus descended into hell**? Actually, there’s quite a bit. First off, I think Calvin is right that **Ps 107:16** or **Zech 9:11** are not proofs of this ... *sort of*. Did I just contradict myself? Both clearly have in context either **Egypt** (Psalm) or **Exile** (Zechariah). The prophet says, “**I will set your prisoners free from**

the waterless pit.” Here, he is likening Babylon to a waterless pit. However, Sheol was in fact clearly viewed as the ultimate expression of a waterless pit. Surrounded by waters of the Great Deep, the pit itself was a dry land.



Similarly, the Psalm speaks metaphorically of God having “shattered the doors of bronze and cut in two the bars of iron” of Egypt, something also found in Isaiah (45:2). But a metaphor has to have roots in something. In this case, it is probable

that the metaphor is Egypt is *likened to Sheol*, the greatest prison of all. If so, if they were prophetic, both would speak more directly towards the *harrowing* of hell (*Descensus Christi ad Inferos*), that is the *emptying of hell*—i.e. of the paradise part of it. And if so, the Fathers may have been right to see in this cryptic prophecies of the Descent.¹⁷ But we are still only talking about the descent, not the Harrowing.

More to our point for now, we have verses like **Acts 2:31**, “[David] foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that *he was not abandoned to Hades*, nor did his flesh see corruption.” Peter is giving us a quote from **Psalm 16:10**. Notice, it was simply assumed for Peter that Jesus went to Hades, but his soul was *not abandoned* in it. It makes no sense for God to not abandon him there if he was never there in the first place, especially when David, the Type, did go to it and penned these words.

Matthew 12:40 (cf. **Luke 11:29**) is a proof. “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.” How is this not proof that Jesus didn’t go straight to heaven? Is heaven in “*the heart of the earth?*”

¹⁷ A great article on this topic is **J. H. Bernard**, “[Descent Into Hades](#),” *Hasting’s Dictionary of the New Testament*, StudyLight.org.

This isn't talking about being buried six-feet under. Sheol was thought to be in the heart of the earth, deep down. Jonah in the fish is the perfect illustration of Sheol-Hades—a dry underworld grave surrounded by water.

Romans 10:7 is another. “Who will descend into the abyss?’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead.” A Targum on **Deuteronomy 30:13**, from which the root idea of this comes says, “*Would that we had one like Jonah the prophet who would descend into the depths of the Great Sea and bring it up*” (Deut 30:13 TgNeof). Given that Jesus likened his own descent earlier to Jonah, it seems that Paul may in fact be doing a little **Midrash on Deuteronomy**, playing off the descent of Jesus.¹⁸ In the preaching of the Gospel alone, Jesus is present to save, as if one went to heaven where he is or descended to hell where he freed the captives. But one need not do that, nor should they, because the Word preached is powerful. You don't have to go and get Christ.

Still another passage is **Ephesians 4:8-9**. “When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.’ In saying, ‘He ascended,’ what does it mean but that *he had also descended into the lower regions of the earth.*” The

¹⁸ **Ernst Käsemann**, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 290.

ESV here reads, “the lower regions, the earth,” as if the descent here was here from heaven to earth. **But this will not do.**¹⁹ As Sam Renihan points out, if Paul is simply saying that Jesus came to the earth, why make it so complicated? Why not just say that? Second, the language of the OT and Jewish literature about Sheol/Hades is that it is “below” the earth (**Tobit 13:2**), in the “depths of the earth” (**Ps 63:9**), “the lower parts of the earth” (Prayer of Manasseh 1:12/Odes 12:13), the same idea Paul gives here. The contrast is the highest of heights and the lowest of depths, which earth is not; Sheol is.²⁰ Finally, Paul is quoting from Psalm 68, a song all about God rescuing his people from Sheol/Hades (see vv. **20-22** and my sermon on that Psalm).

Proof of the *Descensus Christi ad Inferos* (Harrowing of Hell)

Another passage is that Jesus said he was going to **plunder the strongman’s house** (**Luke 11:21-22**). He was foreshadowing this in his casting out of demons, but that was but a foretaste of what he did when he descended into hell. This verse thus begins to help us think about why he went there.

¹⁹ **Contra Michael S. Heiser**, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible*, First Edition (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 293.

²⁰ Renihan, 66.

Of course, Jesus had to go where every human went, and so in that sense, he is one of us and his death must complete that for us. But **the idea is *not* that he went there to suffer.** God forbid! Not even to suffer vicariously for us. **Much less did he go there to give the gospel to people** who had never heard. No, the saints of old were always justified by faith in Christ alone. And all people already knew enough about God in this life to have made them responsible for their rejection of him. As Paul said in that same Romans passage, **“Have they not all heard?” (Rom 10:18).** Of course they have. **“Their voice had gone out to all the earth” (19),** Paul says, quoting **Psalm 19:4** and the knowledge of God we get through creation itself.

But because **Christ had not died yet,** the *legal right* for God to release them from Hades had not been claimed. Yes, they were in Paradise, but not the paradise of heaven. No, they were not suffering, but neither were they in God’s presence in glory. As Hebrews says, **“And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect” (Heb 11:39-40).** So Jesus came to release the captives. That’s why

he descended into hell. **And do to something else**, something linked directly to this. Now we are can talk about the Harrowing of Hell.

Probably the best place to see the Harrowing is Ephesians 4 as it quotes **Psalm 68:18**, “**When he ascended on high he led a host of captives**” in his train. **That’s how we know what Jesus did**. This is not talking about leading them captive out of slavery to Egypt or exile from Babylon, but from the prison of Sheol itself, as the entire context is supernatural. But as I said before, all those verses that use hell as a metaphor of the release of the prisoners from earthly bondage likely had this same idea in mind, typologically speaking. “**I will go before you and level the exalted places, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron**” (**Isa 45:2**). “**For he shatters the doors of bronze and cuts in two the bars of iron**” (**Ps 107:16**). “**I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit. Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope; today I declare that I will restore to you double**” (**Zech 9:11-12**). This this is a kind of “**as on earth [Egypt; Babylon], so in hell**” mirrored prophecy.

Probably the two best passages that teach **the reason** linked to the Harrowing are found in 1 Peter 3 and Psalm

24. Peter says, “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...” (1Pet 3:18). Notice that God through the work of Christ’s death, descent, and resurrection has made us alive and will, when *we* die, *bring us to God*, that is, bring us to heaven. The NT knows no such thing as a Christian who goes to Sheol-Hades-Hell. No, they only go to be with the Lord in heaven (2Cor 5:8; John 14:3; etc.). That’s because Jesus did something to make this possible for us.

Peter continues, “... in which he went and *proclaimed to the spirits in prison*, 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” (1Pet 3:19-20). This is *not* talking about preaching the Gospel to people who died in the days of Noah. Rather, the “spirits” here are *the Watchers* who disobeyed in Genesis 6. They were cast down to hell, and this proclamation is not one of good news, but of *conquest*. As Renihan puts it, “*Jesus did not descend to suffer, but to subdue.*”²¹

²¹ Renihan, 70-71.

By appearing in Tartarus, or the abyss, and declaring his victory, Jesus caused every demon [and fallen angel] to know that their efforts were all in vain. The one whom they murdered was victorious, and they had no power whatsoever to hinder what was going to happen next. Jesus also caused everyone who died in unbelief to know that the one whose name they had refused to name, the one upon whom they had refused to call, was precisely who the Scriptures said he was, precisely who he said he was. They know that their condemnation is just. This was not “preaching” in the sense of an evangelistic opportunity for those who had died in unbelief, but a proclamation of victory and vindication for the Christ, whom they had killed.²²

The other main place we see this doctrine is **Psalm 24**. “Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The LORD, strong and mighty, the LORD, mighty in battle!” (**Ps 24:7-8**). What gates? Not the pearly gates of heaven, but the black gates of hell. Remember Jesus? “The gates of hell shall not prevail” (**Matt 16:18**). Job talked about those gates, “Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?” (**Job**

²² Renihan, 72.

38:17). The Council of Sirmium (359 AD) declared, “He was crucified and he died, and he descended to Hell, and there he ruled all things. The gatekeepers of Hell, seeing him, were terrified. After three days he was resurrected from Hades” (*Council of Sirmium*).

Finally, one of our old Christian texts elaborates that after the Psalm’s words are recited over and over again, when the gatekeepers resist, **Jesus smashes the gates and enters and defeats the powers of hell**. This is beautifully and almost poetically concluded this way:

For three days the band of the righteous was mustered and assembled, so that the wickedness of Death could no longer exercise its might against them ... Jesus smashed the eternal bolts, and the iron gates collapsed on Christ’s command ... The saving divine spirit rejoices, and his triumphal chariot accompanies the band of the righteous and holy ... The saving divine spirit hastens forth and commands the gates of heaven to open: “*Open, open, and rend the immortal bolt. God Christ has stamped out death and called the men he has adopted back to heaven.*” ... It is the Holy Spirit which, in order to show us the might of the Commander Christ, says: “*Raise up the gates for your prince, and raise yourselves, O eternal gates, and the King*

of Glory will enter.” This the angels [demonic doorkeepers?]*—*who had no information since they could not have known that the Word of God had descended to earth*—*are commanded. They respond, therefore, with an urgent question: *“Who is this King of Glory?”* To their question Christ responds with the radiant majesty of his divinity: *“The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle.”* Then the watchers of the heavens recognize the son of God, and they realize everything that has occurred before. They see the captured weaponry of the defeated enemy and, recalling the first command, they too cry aloud together with those who are ascending: *“Raise up the gates, you who preside over the gates, and raise yourselves, O eternal gates, and the King of Glory will enter.”*²³

Why then did Jesus descend to hell? Because **that’s where all humans went**. Because his plan of **salvation demanded it**. Because he had to **free the saints** of their slumber in Elysium—the Paradise of Sheol, who had not yet been brought to glory. The debt had now been paid. Being justified by faith demanded that they not remain there any

²³ This is from **Julius Firmicus Maternus’s** *The Error of Pagan Religions* (fourth century). See Alan Cooper, “Ps 24:7-10: Mythology and Exegesis,” *JBL* 102.1 (Mar 1983): 57-58.

longer. And Jesus must **conquer and plunder** the Strongman, taking it directly to him, showing who is the true King.

There are **few doctrines that are as misunderstood** as this one in our day. Surely, Jesus bore the wrath of God on the cross, but after that he also descended into hell. Not the hell of punishment, but the hell of Paradise. That's where he and the thief on the cross went. As he entered, he demanded that the gates of hell let him in, not as a victim of death, but as a conqueror over it. And now, **they are no longer there**, for Jesus has been raised from the dead.

Hear the word and come to life, you sluggard who sleeps in your sin. **You need not stay in that slumber.** Awake O sleeper and rise. You need not fear the grave and the torments of hell that your sins deserve. “**Abandon every hope, all ye who enter here,**” were the words above gates in Dante's *Inferno*. But Jesus Christ has been raised, **God did not abandon his soul to Sheol.** And any who trust him by faith are raised with him too. Do not think on the fate of those who heard and did not receive, except to know that God is both kind and just and that even hell has levels of punishment. Dante was right about that. It will be worse for some, Jesus says, than others.

But you are not those people if you know Christ, and you still live to trust in him. Think on the good news. You need not fear Death. For Death has been swallowed up by Victory. At the very moment they all thought all hope was lost Jesus Christ, the King of Glory conquered. Who is this King of Glory? The Lord, strong and mighty. The Lord mighty in battle. The Lord you may be with forever, in the Paradise of God when you trust that he has fought this battle for you.

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