

Did Jesus Go To Hell?

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The crowds gathered at the foot of the cross hurled insults and abuse at the dying man hanging above them. Even the two convicts crucified on either side of him mocked him. However, one of the condemned men had a change of heart. He watched the man on the middle cross patiently endure the abuse heaped upon him and realized that there was something different about him. He realized that the man in the middle, Jesus, was the Christ, the Messiah.



"If thou be Christ, save thyself and us," railed the other convict in Luke 23:39.

The other malefactor came to the middle man's defense in verses 40-41. "Dost not thou fear God," he said, "Seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss."

He then looked over to Jesus in verse 42 and said, "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom."

Jesus answered the repentant thief in the next verse. "Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise."

A few hours later all three were dead. The bodies were removed. The bodies of the two thieves, unless claimed by family or friends, were likely cast into the Valley of Hinnom, a repository of trash, refuse, and filth running along the south side of Jerusalem. Jesus' body, however, was placed in a borrowed tomb.

The tomb was sealed. A guard was set. The followers of Jesus Christ grieved over His death. Three days and three nights passed by. The morning of the first day of the week arrived and two women went to the tomb. An angel descended from heaven and rolled away the stone that sealed the tomb and said, "Fear not ye: for I know that ye seek Jesus, which was crucified. He is not here: for he is risen, as he said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. And go quickly, and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead... (Matthew 28:5-7)."

That much of the story you know. But what do you know about what happened to Jesus between the crucifixion and the resurrection?

Some believe that Jesus descended into hell where He suffered for our sins. Well, they are partially correct. Jesus did descend into Hell but it was not to suffer for our sins.

Ephesians 4:8-10 sheds a little light on what happened to Jesus between His death and His resurrection. The Apostle Paul writes:

Wherefore he saith, When he [Jesus] ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. (Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth? He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things.)

But wait a minute, didn't Jesus tell the repentant thief in Luke 23:43, "To day shalt thou be with me in paradise?" Today! Not tomorrow or the next day or three days from now or next week or even next year. Jesus said TODAY! Yet, Paul tells us that when Jesus died on the cross He "descended first into the lower parts of the earth (Ephesians 4:9)." What's going on here? Do we have a contradiction?

Absolutely not!

Luke 23:43 and Ephesians 4:8-10 complement each other. They provide insight into what happened to Jesus between the crucifixion and the resurrection, as well as into what happens to the souls of those who die.

We know, of course, from 2 Corinthians 5:8 that for the born-again believer, "to be absent from the body" is "to be present with the Lord." In other words, when believers die their bodies may go into the grave but their souls go directly to be with the Lord in heaven. The unsaved, on the other hand, go directly into hell, according to Luke 16:22-23.

Now, most people use the term hell when referring to the place where the unsaved go to when they die. Another term frequently used is "the lake of fire." In fact, they are generally considered synonymous. But are they really the same thing? The answer is yes...and no.

Consider, for example, Revelation 20:14:

And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.

Obviously hell, in this verse, is a different thing or place than the lake of fire. You cannot cast something into itself. It must be tossed into something else. For example, you cannot throw a cup into itself. It can be thrown into a sink or a bucket or even a larger cup, but not into itself. It's physically impossible to put something into itself. Consequently, we have to look a little closer at the word hell as it appears in our King James Bible.

Hell appears in both the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament it occurs 31 times. Each time it is translated from the Hebrew word sheol, which is also translated as pit or grave. Sheol is defined by Strong as "...Hades or the world of the dead (as if a subterranean retreat), including its accessories and inmates:--grave, hell, pit." In other words, sheol is the dwelling place or abode of the dead.

In the New Testament, hell occurs 23 times. It is translated from gehenna 12 times, hades 10 times, and tartarus one time. Hades is also translated as grave once. Two of these three words, hades and tartarus, are similar to the Hebrew, sheol. They refer to a temporary dwelling place where the dead await their final judgment before being consigned to the lake of fire for all eternity. Gehenna, on the other hand, refers to the lake of fire, which is the eternal dwelling place of the dead.

Now, let's go back to Revelation 20:14 and put it into context along with the verses immediately before and after it. Verses 13-15 say:

And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works. And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire.

When we look at the Greek words we find that verse 13 says that "...death and hell (hades/the abode of the dead) delivered up the dead which were in them." Then, in verse 14 we find that "...death and hell (hades/the abode of the dead) were cast into the lake of fire."

Obviously then, as noted earlier, hell (hades) is cast into something other than itself. It is cast into the lake of fire. That shows us also that hades is a temporary place which will one day have served its purpose. The lake of fire, on the other hand, is an eternal place (Revelation 14:10-11; 20:10). With that in mind we can begin to get a picture of the underworld and hopefully gain an understanding of what happens to the dead.

We need to remember, though, that death was not part of God's original plan. The Bible tells us in Romans 5:12, "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned." And, with the advent of death there was a need for a place to put those who die. Specifically, the souls of those die.

However, Adam and Eve were not the first to sin. That dubious honor goes to Lucifer. He, in turn, led as many as a third of the other angels in a failed rebellion against God. As a consequence, "...God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment (2 Peter 2:4)."

Hell in 2 Peter 2:4 comes not from hades but rather tartarus. Tartarus is defined by Strong as "the deepest abyss of Hades." It, as a part of hades, is a temporary place, as Jude 1:6 brings out: "And the angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation, he hath reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day."

The "great day," referred to in 2 Peter 2:4 refers to the day of the Great White throne Judgement of Revelation 20. After being held in tartarus until "the judgment of the great day" those rebellious angels will be cast "into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels (Matthew 25:41)." "Everlasting fire" being the fires of the eternal lake of fire or gehenna, which will never be quenched (Mark 9:43-48).

In contrast, the Old Testament, as noted above, only uses one word, sheol, for hell. It is used to describe the destinations of both the wicked and the righteous when they die. In Psalms 9:17, for instance, David said, "The wicked shall be turned into hell (sheol), and all the nations that forget God." He also used the same word in Psalms 16:10 when he said, "For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell (sheol); neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption."

Now, let's get back to our look at what happened to Jesus between the crucifixion and the resurrection. Remember, Jesus said to the thief on the cross, "To day shalt thou be with me in paradise." Yet, we also saw in Ephesians 4:8-10, that Jesus "descended first into the lower parts of the earth." We also saw that David (Psalm 16:10; Acts 2:25-27) expected to reside in hell temporarily after his death, yet God describes David as a man "who kept my commandments, and who followed me with all his heart, to do that only which was right in mine eyes" in 1 Kings 14:8.

Here is what's going on. Prior to the resurrection those that died with faith in the Messiah to come did not go directly into heaven. The blood of Christ that was to pay for all sin had not yet been shed. They, like David, went to hell instead, but not to a place of torment. Like the beggar, Lazarus, in Luke 16:22, Jesus and the repentant thief descended first into the lower parts of the earth where they joined David and Abraham and all the righteous dead in Abraham's bosom or Paradise.

The unrepentant thief, however, also died and went to hell. But he shared the fate of the rich man in Luke 16:23 instead, "...in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seethe Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom." He, and all those who had died in their sin, were separated from those in the paradise side by a great, impassible gulf (Luke 16:26).

While in hell Jesus did not have to suffer for our sins. After all, Jesus proclaimed from the cross that the price for sin had been paid when He said, "It is finished (John 19:30)" and then died. He "was once offered to bear the sins of many (Hebrews 9:28)" and therefore did not have to suffer again in hell.

Instead, Jesus presented Himself to those in hell as the Messiah. Those in paradise met the Messiah that they had been awaiting. Those in torment saw afar off the Messiah that they had rejected. He proclaimed liberty to the captives when He "preached unto the spirits in prison (1 Peter 3:18)" and then, to paraphrase Isaiah 61:1, opened the prison of those that were bound in paradise. In triumph over sin and death, "When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men (Ephesians 4:8)."

The sacrifice for sin had been paid. Those once in paradise were taken to heaven. The door to heaven for all those who would die with faith in Jesus Christ in the future was opened so that now believers can say, "Absent from the body, present with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8)."

Did Jesus go to hell? The answer is yes. And the place has never been the same since.

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