

## **Under the Power of Death**

Matthew 27:51-66

One of the phrases in the Apostles' Creed that often causes much confusion is the declaration that Jesus descended into hell. Some people, too easily led astray, believe that means that Jesus spent time in hell, separated from his Father in heaven, from his death on Friday night until his resurrection on Monday morning. Such an idea, however, contradicts Jesus' own statement which we studied last week, his final words before he died,

Luke 23:46 "And when Jesus had cried out with a loud voice, He said, "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit.' " Having said this, He breathed His last."

The idea of his descent into hell lasting from his death until his resurrection also a contradiction of that great word he spoke to the thief upon the cross next to him,

Luke 23:43 And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."

So what do the words of the Apostles Creed mean then, that Jesus descended into hell? One very reasonable answer is that they refer to what Jesus endured during those three hours of darkness, the three hours of condemnation when he endured the awful justice and wrath of God the Father as the punishment and penalty of our sins. Thus the experience of hell is what Jesus endured when he cried out,

v.46 "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" that is, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

Hell is an accurate and helpful description of that experience, and Jesus' experience of suffering condemnation was appropriately expressed by the cessation of the light of the sun, the three hours of darkness. But there is an even better

explanation of the words of Apostles' Creed, a better reference to what we affirm with those words, "He descended into hell." And that is to say that those words proclaim the true reality of Jesus' human death, human death defined by the separation of the body and the soul. The words in the creed are sometimes then translated, "He descended into the grave." And so, for three days, until the third day, until the resurrection of his body, Jesus' human nature experienced the power of death in that his body lay in the grave, a corpse, while at the same time, his spirit went to be with his Father in heaven. Our Larger Catechism defines that experience as Jesus being "under the power of death all the third day."

He remained under the power of death, that is, his body and soul separated. I should note that those who die in Christ in this age have the very same experience until their resurrection at the end of the age. Under the power of death. The body, a mere corpse, in the grave. And the soul remaining alive; which for Jesus, as well as for every true believer, means they enter the presence of God immediately upon their death. And that is our subject and focus this afternoon—the experience of Jesus from his death until his resurrection. He remained under the power of death. Which is to say, he descended into hell.

What we see first in that experience is startling, and too often, too easily overlooked. Just look at what Matthew describes.

v.51-53

I want to begin with the earthquakes. Rocks were split. The earth itself shook. Does miss the intensity of those words. And there is nothing these words to suggest that the description is symbolic. Rather, this literally happened. This actually took place. This was absolutely astounding, literally earth-shaking. All of that shows that there is significance for Jesus' death upon the

whole creation, the whole cosmos. And there was no delay, this was immediate. When Jesus died, a few hours after those three hours of physical darkness, we observe another supernatural intrusion of God into the human lives and earthly existence of his creatures. The whole world was affected, and the obvious idea is the,

## **I. SUPERNATURAL TESTIMONY OF JESUS' VICTORY OVER DEATH.**

The triumph over death didn't begin with the resurrection, but right here, right away. When Jesus died the earth shook so greatly that rocks were split, rock formations ruptured and fractured. And we see,

### **A. Earthquakes and open graves.**

Earthquakes, of course, have a very natural cause. Though they are still rather unpredictable, scientists today understand their origin, they have identified the particular fault lines upon which earthquakes form, and they are studied and measured in great detail. And here, at the very moment Jesus died, God himself shows forth his own power to bring about that otherwise natural phenomenon by his own supernatural power.

But it wasn't random. It wasn't aimless or arbitrary. There was a specific purpose, above and beyond the mere display of supernatural power. And that was to open the graves of many who had died. Many who had previously died, whose bodies had become mere corpses, were raised from the dead. Matthew makes a point of emphasizing that this resurrection was restricted to true believers.

v.52 "...the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised."

Dead corpses top life. Such was the triumphant victory of

Jesus' death! Obviously, the climax of that triumph wouldn't come until Sunday morning, with his own resurrection, but immediately upon his death that power of the resurrection was already evident. And I should add with emphasis, this account is historically reliable and true. There would be witnesses, not only of the earthquakes and tombs being opened, but of those resurrected as well.

v.53

I have a little question in my own mind of whether or not this was a permanent resurrection; that is, were these resurrected believers brought back to life still with their mortal bodies, obviously then to die again in God's time and purpose. Like Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead personally. Or were these saints raised from the dead in order to be taken up into glory directly, like Elijah or Enoch. We read in,

Gen. 5:24 "And Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him."

Likewise,

Heb. 11:5 "By faith Enoch was taken away so that he did not see death, "and was not found, because God had taken him"; for before he was taken he had this testimony, that he pleased God."

I think it could be either case. I tend to think he likely retained his mortal humanity and would die again, but one of my most trusted commentators makes a very strong emphasis that they would have been raised to life and taken to heaven directly after appearing to many in the city of Jerusalem. In either case, clearly they testify of the triumph of Jesus' death, his victory over the power of death itself. And so while Jesus remained under the power of death until the resurrection, we read this very plain and striking testimony,

v.52-53

Along with that we see,

**B. A true testimony of Jesus' identity.**

v.54

God always has a witness for the gospel, he always has a witness to demonstrate the historical truth of all the power that he proclaims. And Matthew records the response of the centurion, a military officer in command of approximately one hundred other men. And we don't know if every single man under his command understood as much as he did and proclaimed the truth as much as he did, but the words are emphatic. The true testimony of Jesus' identity is not that of the centurion alone, but also "those with him, who were guarding Jesus." "Truly this was the Son of God!" And so he was! Luke's gospel adds these words,

Luke 23:47 "So when the centurion saw what had happened, he glorified God, saying, "Certainly this was a righteous Man!"

Something else happened just then, that I skipped over thus far. I need to come back to it. And that is the reference in,

v.51 "Then, behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom."

The veil of the temple was torn in two, torn down, and with it, the whole of Old Testament ceremonial religion. Jesus' death brought about,

**II. A DEFINITIVE END TO THE EXTERNAL ORDINANCES OF OLD TESTAMENT RELIGION.**

This marks the transition from the Old Testament to the new, a transition that can be best understood in the context of what we studied last week with the words "once for all." Jesus' sacrifice of his own body, his own life, was done once, once for all, by contrast to all the external ordinances specified for Old Testament priests. Remember that all of those Old Testament sacrifices had

to be repeated, year and year. But Jesus sacrifice of his own body was finished once and for all. And so we read,

Heb. 7:26 "For such a High Priest was fitting for us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens; 27 who does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people's, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. 28 For the law appoints as high priests men who have weakness, but the word of the oath, which came after the law, appoints the Son who has been perfected forever."

As I noted last week as well, the substitutionary work of Christ was finished, made perfect and complete forever.

Heb. 9:1 "But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. 12 Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption."

Once for all. That is what is so significant about this. Nothing else has to be done, nothing else could possibly be done. Jesus did it all. And, therefore, the temple was no longer a meaningful symbol or expression of true worship, for the existence of the temple was for the continuing, ongoing practice of offering sacrifices in the presence of God. And thus we can understand,

**A. The religious significance of the veil.**

The veil separated the outer court of the temple from the inner place called the holy of holies. That was the specific place which represented the very presence of God, his dwelling place. And so we read,

Ex. 26:31 "You shall make a veil woven of blue, purple, and scarlet thread, and fine woven linen. It shall be woven with an artistic design of cherubim. 32 You shall hang it upon the four

pillars of acacia wood overlaid with gold. Their hooks shall be gold, upon four sockets of silver. 33 And you shall hang the veil from the clasps. Then you shall bring the ark of the Testimony in there, behind the veil. The veil shall be a divider for you between the holy place and the Most Holy. 34 You shall put the mercy seat upon the ark of the Testimony in the Most Holy. 35 You shall set the table outside the veil, and the lampstand across from the table on the side of the tabernacle toward the south; and you shall put the table on the north side.”

The Ark of the Testimony, or Ark of the Covenant, is the place of God’s presence, covered by the mercy seat. And it was inside the veil. “Then you shall bring the ark of the Testimony in there, behind the veil. The veil shall be a divider for you between the holy place and the Most Holy. You shall put the mercy seat upon the ark of the Testimony in the Most Holy.” So God was inside the veil. God’s presence was upon the mercy seat in that holy of holies. And the veil separated the holy God from the unholy people. The high priest would enter that holy of holies, behind the veil, once a year, with the sacrifice of atonement. And so we read,

Heb. 9:1 “Then indeed, even the first covenant had ordinances of divine service and the earthly sanctuary. 2 For a tabernacle was prepared: the first part, in which was the lampstand, the table, and the showbread, which is called the sanctuary; 3 and behind the second veil, the part of the tabernacle which is called the Holiest of All, 4 which had the golden censer and the ark of the covenant overlaid on all sides with gold, in which were the golden pot that had the manna, Aaron’s rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant; 5 and above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail. 6 Now when these things had been thus prepared, the priests always went into the first part of the tabernacle, performing the services. 7 But into

the second part the high priest went alone once a year, not without blood, which he offered for himself and for the people’s sins committed in ignorance; 8 the Holy Spirit indicating this, that the way into the Holiest of All was not yet made manifest while the first tabernacle was still standing. 9 It was symbolic for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience— 10 concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation.”

Jesus’ death brought that time of reformation, and those fleshly ordinances, those external ordinances, are now ended. No longer necessary. With good reason, as Hebrews 9 continues,

Heb. 9:11 “ut Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. 12 Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. 13 For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, 14 how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? 15 And for this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.”

That is,

### **B. The religious significance of the veil torn down.**

Jesus has opened the door to the presence of God. He went into that holy of holies with the sacrifice of his own human life,

once for all.

Heb. 9:26 “He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.”

We no longer need a human priest. We no longer need blood sacrifices of animal. We no longer need an altar. And we are no longer prohibited from entrance into the very presence of God. Because we have Jesus.

Heb. 6:19 “This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil, 20 where the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus, having become High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.”

The significance of this event should be of great encouragement to us, therefore, giving us a confidence that no believer in the Old Testament would have. That confidence is so well expressed in,

Heb. 10:19 “Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, 20 by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, 21 and having a High Priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.”

When the veil was torn down, represented by the tearing apart of Jesus’ own body unto death, when that veil was removed, we now can have “boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh.”

Such a great privilege is ours. We can come to that mercy

seat. We can come to the presence of God to find grace to help in time of need. Because we have a high priest, one whose death opened the door for us to be welcomed into the most holy place of God’s own presence in heaven. All that was accomplished by the triumph of the cross, Jesus’ death for our sins.

Let me end this afternoon with the further historical testimony which we are given in this text as,

### **III. PERSONAL TESTIMONY OF JESUS’ DEATH.**

First, from those godly women who are specifically mentioned.

#### **A. The testimony of faithful women.**

v.55-56

Also, v.61

John’s gospel adds the detail that Mary, Jesus’ mother was among them as well. It is well worth noting the courage of these women is obvious and praiseworthy. The disciples’ absences also noteworthy, an obvious indication of their fear and weakness at this point, their unwillingness to be identified with Jesus as he died. And these women are noted for their practical faithfulness of “ministering to Jesus” according to verse 55. That had been their habit during his life, and their outward display of loving compassion for Jesus’ needs didn’t end when he was condemned to die. As we will see in the next chapter, it was they who continued their ministry to Jesus on the day of his resurrection,

Matt. 28:1 “Now after the Sabbath, as the first day of the week began to dawn, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb. 2 And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat on it. 3 His countenance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow. 4 And the guards shook for fear of him, and became like dead

men. 5 But the angel answered and said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. 6 He is not here; for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. 7 And go quickly and tell His disciples that He is risen from the dead, and indeed He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him. Behold, I have told you.” 8 So they went out quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to bring His disciples word. 9 And as they went to tell His disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, “Rejoice!” So they came and held Him by the feet and worshiped Him. 10 Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell My brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me.”

Jesus honored these faithful women by appearing to them, his first resurrection appearance recorded. It was they who would then go and tell the disciples of the resurrection. Again, the obvious emphasis is upon the appropriate praise bestowed upon these women for their faithfulness. Then we see,

### **B. The faithfulness of Joseph of Arimathea.** v.57-60

Matthew tells us he was a rich man. Luke tells us that he was a member of the Sanhedrin Council, noting that he was “a good and just man. [And that] He had not consented to their decision and deed.”

Mark tells us he was a prominent member of the Sanhedrin, and he had become a true believer.

Mark 15:43. “Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent council member, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, coming and taking courage, went in to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.”

It was the preparation day, the day before the sabbath, and John tells his that he came “secretly, for fear of the Jews.” But nonetheless he came to fulfill an important duty, to see to it that Jesus’ body didn’t hang upon the cross over the Sabbath day. According to Deuteronomy 21:23, it was forbidden to leave a dead body on a tree overnight, and that would be all the more reprehensible if, by doing so, the body would be hanging on a tree or cross on the sabbath. So Joseph’s actions were praiseworthy. He was seeing that the law would be fulfilled and that Jesus would not be further dishonored. He was, as Matthew puts it, verse 57, one who had also become a disciple of Jesus.

So it was, because of Joseph’s faithfulness, that Jesus’ body was put into a sepulcher, not buried in the ground but sealed in a cave, a cave whose opening was sealed with a large stone. We’re told in verse 60 that Joseph “laid [Jesus’ body] in his new tomb which he had hewn out of the rock; and he rolled a large stone against the door of the tomb, and departed.”

Jesus was buried with honor, his human corpse treated with appropriate respect. And I should note the further fulfillment of the prophecy of,

Is. 53:9 “And they made His grave with the wicked—But with the rich at His death, Because He had done no violence, Nor was any deceit in His mouth.”

Then, finally, we have,

### **C. The reliable security of the guards sealing the tomb.**

They are mentioned, of course, to give tangible evidence of the reality of Jesus’ resurrection. The chief priests and Pharisees among the Jews had heard about his prophecy of resurrection on the third day, so they wanted to be sure that no one would steal Jesus’ corpse in order to make up that story. But, of course, this

action provided conclusive evidence that the proclamation of the resurrection could not be a made up story, because this tomb was secure. It was sealed and guarded, guarded by soldiers would do so upon the promise of their own lives! There would be no possible way for Jesus' corpse to be stolen. Pilate saw to that.

v.62-66

We will, of course, see next week what comes next! The resurrection. But until that time, Jesus remained under the power of death, his corpse in the grave while separated from his soul, the very definition of human death. And so I will end today with this great encouragement,

Heb. 2:14 "Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, 15 and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. 16 For indeed He does not give aid to angels, but He does give aid to the seed of Abraham. 17 Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. 18 For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted."