

The Victor

(Week 5)

“He descended to the dead; the third day He rose again from the dead;”

Because Jesus actually died, His spirit was actually separated from His body and it had to go somewhere. He went to the place of the dead, like every other human being who has died. An older English translation of the Apostle’s Creed uses the word “hell” for the place where Jesus went. Unfortunately, that word is misleading. Hell is, originally, in Germanic mythology, the place for all the dead except the heroic, named after the goddess who ruled it. Anyone who has seen “Thor III: Ragnarok” knows what I’m talking about. Early English Christians used the word to translate several different Hebrew and Greek words in the Bible. Unfortunately, there were several different words in the original biblical languages for a reason.

Christ went to Hades—the Greek close equivalent of the Germanic “Hell”—or its Hebrew parallel: Sheol.¹ This was the generic place of the dead; the righteous and the unrighteous alike ended up there. The two groups were treated very differently, but, in a sense, they were in the same place because they were both dead.² Hell, as most use the word today, is a place of fiery punishment and the abode of devils. This definition of Hell more closely matches other biblical words that we will discuss later.

It is common for us to think of the gospel—good news—of Jesus in legal or relational terms, and that is an accurate way to think about it. However, when we are talking about Christ’s descent to Hades, it helps us to think of it in battle terms. God has an enemy: Satan, the serpent who tempted Adam and Eve and the foremost demon at the head of a host of demons. At the cross, Jesus did not just demonstrate His love for humanity, He defeated the Devil. This was, of course, what God had promised back in Eden the Messiah would do.³ So, after Christ’s heel was bit on the cross, He went to proclaim to the dead and some imprisoned demons, what Satan, the rest of the demons, the angels, and God already knew: Satan’s head was crushed.⁴ The New Testament uses imagery borrowed from a Roman pastime: the triumph or victory parade.⁵ The conquering general, along with his loyal soldiers, paraded his captured booty and enemies through the city, giving gifts away to his friends like it was Christmas and everyone’s birthday at the same time. Obviously, if you were on the victorious commander’s side, this was wonderfully awesome, but if you were not, it was terribly humiliating.

The icing on this whole delicious cake, as it were, is the Resurrection. In fact, Jesus rising from the dead signals one of the main ways He beat His adversary: the power of death is no longer a weapon in the Devil’s arsenal.⁶ Christ “holds the keys of death and Hades.”⁷ Death is not the end. Jesus said so and then He backed it up by personally demonstrating the fact.⁸ Just as Jesus is the linchpin of history, His resurrection is the linchpin of His life. Everything He said and did was vindicated in the most spectacular fashion.⁹ He is the Risen Lord, who has trampled the forces of wickedness and death itself, who holds the life gate open and a spot in His victory procession for all those who trust Him. Chin up! The battle is won. Satan is still vicious, but the death-blow has already landed. Proclaim the good news as a herald of the Victorious King, who was dead, but is now alive forever.

1 Acts 2:31

2 See Jesus’ parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31.

3 Genesis 3:15

4 1 Peter 3:19+20; 4:6

5 Ephesians 4:8-10; Colossians 2:15

6 Hebrews 2:14+15

7 Revelation 1:18

8 John 11:25+26

9 Romans 1:4