

Christ's Ascension, and Ours – 2 Cor 5:1-8, Eph 4:8-10

Introduction – Forty days after His resurrection, Jesus Christ left this earth and ascended to heaven (Acts 1:1-3, 9). As the scriptures teach us about His death, descent into Hades, resurrection, and ascension into Heaven, we also learn more distinctions about the afterlife. What happens to believers at death? The WSC answers, “*The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness (Heb 12:23), and do immediately pass into glory (Luke 23:43); and their bodies, being still united to Christ (1 Thess 4:14), do rest in their graves till the resurrection (Is 57:2, John 5:28f).*” While details are sketchy, there is much to understand and rejoice over in the details of Christ’s victory over death, your death, and the lord of death (Heb 2:14). So let’s consider some details...

Paradise and the Garden of Eden – Sometimes you hear of the Garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve dwelt with God, called Paradise (the Greek translation of Gen 2:8, Ezek 28:13, as well as in the historical writings of Josephus). The first Adam was placed in Paradise where he was to dwell with God and, moving out from this place, to take dominion over all of the earth as the Lord’s prince regent. After the Fall, Adam and Eve were driven out of Paradise (Gen 3:23), but a second Adam would come Who would take those in Him to Paradise (Luke 23:43). In Rev 2:7 we are told that the tree of life was still in the Paradise of God, and we see this tree also where the throne of God resides, where the Lamb sits (Rev 22:1-2). Environmentalists would have you believe that paradise is a place where nature is wild and untouched by human hands. But Paradise refers to a walled garden, even a garden-city, cultivated and protected under man’s dominion. Therefore, in one sense, the Ascension of Jesus Christ restores humanity in his relationship to God and in his dominion from Paradise and out to the rest of the world.

Sheol and Hades – Sheol, in the Hebrew OT, was the place of departed spirits, and was the place where both the righteous and unrighteous would go (Isaiah 38:10, Psalm 86:13, also Isaiah 28:15, Prov 9:18). Hades is the Greek NT word for Sheol (so Psalm 16:10 is translated in Acts 2:27). Peter’s use of this Psalm showed that the fulfillment of Psalm 16 was in the death and resurrection of Jesus. His soul went down to Hades, but was not abandoned there; His body lay in the grave and was resurrected before it saw corruption.

Peter alludes to Christ’s descent into Hades (the spirits in prison) in 1 Pet 3:18-20, and Paul also speaks of Christ’s ascension after “*He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth*” (Eph 4:9). Sometimes there is confusion about the Apostles’ Creed because the Old English notion of “hell” was closer to the idea of Hades. In modern English, “hell” is referring to the place of final judgment, the lack of fire. But Jesus did not suffer in hell. He descended into Hades and rose again with the “*keys of Hades and of Death*” (Rev 1:18). In the final judgment, Death and Hades are cast into hell, the lake of fire (Rev 20:13-14). The Greek word for hell is *Gehenna*, which was a morphed word naming a garbage dump outside of Jerusalem; a place of worms and burning fires (Mark 9:44).

Abraham’s Bosom and Tartarus – The biblical writers saw Hades as divided into two places. Christ tells of the story of Lazarus and the rich man both of whom end up in Hades (Luke 16:19-31). The rich man was found in a place of great torments (v23) while Lazarus was found in a place of great comfort; a place called Abraham’s Bosom (v22). The Greek and Roman world also knew of two places, Elysium and Tartarus. In the New Testament, the place of comfort is called Paradise, but Peter uses the term Tartarus in 2 Pet 2:4 as the place where God had sent the fallen angels. Jesus said He would spend three days and nights in the heart of the earth (Matt 12:40), but He also told the thief on the cross that he would be with Him that day in Paradise (Luke 23:42). The thief, therefore, went down with Christ to Hades, to the place in Hades called Paradise.

The Ascension of Paradise with Christ (Eph 4:8-10) – It appears that when Jesus rose from Hades and ascended to heaven that He didn’t leave the faithful down in Paradise. Instead, “*He led captivity captive.*” Paradise was brought up with Christ, along with the faithful in Christ, and ascended on high, “*far above all the heavens.*” This is why Paul gives an account of being caught *up* into Paradise (2 Cor 12:4). The atonement of Jesus Christ really procured the salvation and entry of His people into heaven with Him.

Christ’s Ascension and Ours (2 Cor 5:1-8) – So where do we go when we die? The souls of those who are in Christ ascend to heaven and are immediately in His presence (v8). But there is more to understand, for this is only the beginning. Paul knows that his earthly body will be destroyed and longs for his heavenly, perfected, glorified body (vv1-3). He is not looking forward to being body-less, unclothed forever, like some Platonic Gnostic (v4), but rather to be swallowed up with a glorious new body of life. The Spirit has been given as an earnest of this (v5) so that walking by faith (v7), we know that even though now absent from the Lord (v6), we will one day ascend to be in His presence (v8) where we will enjoy fellowship with Him until and beyond the Final Resurrection. But that’s another part of the story...

Because Christ Ascended – our souls will ascend at our death to heaven. And Christ is the only way to escape Hades and hell.

Because Christ Ascended – we have nothing to fear in death. There is no Hades, no purgatory, no soul-sleep, for those in Christ.

Because Christ Ascended – in His resurrected body, we will have resurrected bodies even though ours rest in the graves for a time.

Because Christ Ascended – The gates of heaven are open, Paradise is restored, a Man reigns over heaven and earth, and, as Paul writes later in 2 Cor 5, “*old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.*”