

Where Did Jesus Go for Three Days?



A great question many children ask when they hear the story of Jesus death and resurrection is, where was Jesus during those three days? Many adults cannot answer that question because they aren't sure or they just don't know. We however have some indications from Scripture, though no clear and concise teaching on it. There are several Scriptures I want to share with you here to help you in your understanding.

The Apostle's Creed

The earliest known mention of the "**Apostles' Creed**" occurs in AD 390 A.D. and has been associated with the belief that, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, each of the Twelve Apostles contributed an article to the twelve articles. This was the first concise statement of Christian doctrine and belief.

But one statement in the Apostle's Creed causes us great confusion in the way it states, *"He descended into hell."* *The problem is with the word "hell."* *The original Greek used the word "Hades" which was a Greek translation of the Hebrew word "Sheol" which meant the place of the dead - nothing more. But in our westernized thought the word "hell" conjures up scenes of Dante's Inferno, or hell fire and brimstone.*

There are a number of words in our Bible that are translated as Hell. The first is Sheol (Hebrew) and Hades (Greek translation of the Hebrew word Sheol which means the place of the dead, without any distinction to where or what it was. It could also simply mean the grave.

Then there is the Greek and Aramaic word *Gehenna* which is a descriptive term defining the Valley of Hinnon outside the walls of Jerusalem where refuse was burned continually. It was also a cursed place where Israelites had offered their children by fire. (see Jeremiah 7:31 and 19:2-6) The Rabbis traditionally taught *Gehenna* as a destination of the wicked which was different from *Sheol* or *Hades*, the place of the dead.

Finally Peter uses the word *Tartarus* to describe the place where wicked evil spirits are reserved to the day of judgment. It comes from the Greek mythology where *Tartarus* is the deep abyss that is used as a dungeon of torment and suffering for the wicked and as the prison for the Titans (the fallen angels, sons of gods in Genesis 6).

Having said all that to clarify our definitions, let's talk about where Jesus went during the three days in the grave. He went somewhere. He wasn't just sleeping in the grave. So, where did he go? In a moment we will consider the Scriptures concerning this.

Historically some theologians believed he went to the place of torment, hell or *Gehenna*, and suffered for us there, taking our punishment. That, however, is nowhere taught in Scripture. Jesus did not go to the burning hell to suffer for us. God's word says in Psalm 16:9-10

"Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will dwell securely. For You will not abandon my soul to Sheol, nor will You let Your Holy One see decay. You have made known to me the path of life; You will fill me with joy in Your presence, with eternal pleasures at Your right hand...."

The whole context of that Psalm is that Jesus would not suffer the decay of a rotting body, and we may assume therefore that God would not send his Son to hell to suffer the ultimate corruption.

Now let me clarify the Rabbinic teachings and Jewish understanding of death and the afterlife. The Rabbis taught that *Sheol/Hades*, the place of the dead, had two compartments: 1) was a place of torment defined by the word *Gehenna* 2) was a place of peace and rest in “*Abraham’s bosom*” (a bosom was a large pocket on the front of someone’s garment where he placed things for safe keeping), commonly called *Paradise*.

Jesus used these terms when he gave the parable (maybe it was a real story, not a parable) of the rich man and Lazarus who both died. You’ll find that story in Luke 19:16-31

¹⁹ *There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day:*

²⁰ *And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores,*

²¹ *And desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man’s table: moreover the dogs came and licked his sores.*

²² *And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham’s bosom: <2859 κόλπος kolpos> the rich man also died, and was buried;*

²³ *And in hell <86 Ἅδης hades> he lifted up his eyes, being in torments, and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.*

²⁴ *And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.*

²⁵ *But Abraham said, Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and you are tormented.*

²⁶ *And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence.*

²⁷ *Then he said, I pray you therefore, father, that you wouldest send him to my father’s house:*

²⁸ *For I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment.*

²⁹ *Abraham said unto him, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.*

³⁰ *And he said, No, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent.*

³¹ *And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.*

We see here from the mouth of the Lord Jesus that there are indeed two compartments after death. The one is a place of torment and flames called Hades. The other is a place of rest and peace in the bosom of Abraham.

Other Scriptures shed some light on this matter as well.

John 20:17

Mary - *I have not yet ascended to the Father* (so, then, where was he for three days? He descended but had not yet ascended to the Father.)

Luke's 23:39-43 - One of the criminals on the cross
"Today you will be with me in paradise."

Ephesians 4:7-10

*This is why it (he) says: "When he 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.)"* This is a quotation from Psalm 68:18.

What does "**led captivity captive**" mean? Some say he led captive a host of captives and gave gifts to men. That is he took demons captive and out of play, out of commission, and gave the church power and authority through gifts.

Others believe it to mean that Jesus took captive hades and paradise and released those confined in the bosom of Abraham to

the paradise of heaven, and those in hades' torment were pronounced eternally captive with demons awaiting the resurrection and final judgment.

Colossians 2:13-14

13 And you, being dead in your sins ..., has he quickened (made alive, raised up) together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses; 14 Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross; 15 And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it (in the cross).

2 Peter 2:4 Angels of Genesis 6

For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, (tartarus) putting them in chains of darkness to be held for judgment; ... ⁹ and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished:

1 Peter 3:18-20

Jesus was “put to death in the flesh but made alive in the Spirit” and made proclamation to spirits in prison. (This was not evangelistic preaching but a pronouncement of his triumph over death and hell to them then in prison in Hades.)

¹⁸ For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit. ¹⁹ After being made alive, he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits— ²⁰ to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water,

Therefore during his descent in to Hades he announced the final defeat to demons confined in the earth, and those who since the flood waited for their final judgment and defeat.

Other Opinions & Explanations

"Where was Jesus for the three days between His death and resurrection? Did Jesus go to Hell?" Southern Seminary professor
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TcyEbxjYhxg>

Ask Doug: Benjamin Merkle, Christ Church, Moscow, ID
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yvfv0uF4Db0>

The Apostles Creed

*I believe in God, the Father almighty,
Creator of heaven and earth,
and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died and was buried;
he descended into hell;
on the third day he rose again from the dead;
he ascended into heaven, and
is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
from there he will come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and life everlasting. Amen.*