

What Happened Between the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus?

One of the greatest biblical mysteries concerns what happened between the crucifixion of the Son of God and His resurrection three days later. Very little is written in Scripture about the subterranean events that were so monumental that two earthquakes shook Jerusalem before and after that 72-hour span of time (Matt. 27:54, 28:2).

Some Bible teachers suggest Jesus suffered damnation in hell as a sinner during that period, and that this was a major component of His substitutionary sacrifice for fallen humanity. Those who subscribe to this view insist Jesus' physical death was insufficient in paying the full price of redemption, that a spiritual death was also necessary.

Often, the related idea is promoted that during those three days, Jesus was tortured by Satan and his demons in the hellish realm below. As that "wrestling meet" came to a close, the Prince of Life was finally able to wrench the keys of death and hell away from the devil and overcome—for His sake and for ours. Proponents of this doctrine believe that around that same time, miraculously, the Spirit of God reentered Jesus and He was born again, thus becoming "the firstborn from the dead," emerging from the tomb shortly afterward (Rev. 1:5b).

On the contrary, the Bible does not depict Satan reigning in hell, or possessing the "keys of death and hell" (though he is described as having "the power of death," [Heb. 2:14b]). Instead, he is titled "the prince of the power of the air" (Eph. 2:2b), the "ruler of this world," "the prince of this world" and the "the god of this world" (John 12:31b, 14:30b,

16:11b; 2 Cor. 4:4a). He is never called the “prince,” “ruler” or “god” of the underworld. Peter even claimed he “walks around as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour” (1 Pet. 5:8b). That locates him right here, among the global populace, not imprisoned below.

Paul’s Revelation: The Descension and Ascension of Jesus

Paul helps our understanding by expanding on the following Old Testament verse:

“Thou hast ascended on high, thou hast led captivity captive: thou hast received gifts for men; yea, for the rebellious also, that the Lord God might dwell among them” (Ps. 68:18, KJV).

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In expanding this prophecy, Paul explained:

“Therefore He says: ‘When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men.’ (Now this, ‘He ascended,’ what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth?” (Eph. 4:8-9, NKJV).

When Jesus ascended, it resulted in captivity being led captive. That could be interpreted either symbolically or literally.

The symbolic interpretation: All things that possess the power to “captivate” God’s people in this world (depression, fear, unbelief, lust and so on) were brought under the dominion of the Son of God (“captivated”) during His death, burial and resurrection. Therefore, His people can be set free from those influences.

The literal interpretation: The redeemed of the Old Testament era could not enter the third heaven at death because the supreme sacrifice of Jesus’ blood had not yet been paid. They

were “captives” held in a temporary underworld location. Jesus descended to liberate them.

Sheol and the Story of the Rich Man and Lazarus

Jesus clarified this important issue when He shared the story of “The Rich Man and Lazarus.” (See Luke 16:19-31.) That narrative features the destiny of two men who died, both descending into Sheol. The rich man, because of his selfish lifestyle, went to the place of torment, reserved for the wicked, while Lazarus, the beggar, went to the place of comfort, reserved for the righteous (called “Abraham’s bosom”). When Jesus descended into the “lower parts of the earth,” He evidently visited this mysterious spiritual realm. An important question is this: Which of the two chambers did He visit—or did He go to both?

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Peter’s Revelation

Peter’s insight implies Jesus preached in both realms.

“For Christ also has once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but made alive by the Spirit, by whom He also went and preached to the spirits in prison, who in times past were disobedient, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah” (1 Pet. 3:18-20a, MEV).

In the next chapter, Peter added:

“For to this end the gospel was preached also to those who are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the Spirit. (1 Pet. 4:6, NKJV).

So we can assume that Jesus declared the message of salvation to both the righteous in Abraham’s bosom and the wicked in the

realm of the tormented. Did He give both an opportunity to repent and receive Him as Lord? It seems He did. Some interpret the “spirits in prison” to be fallen angels, but that seems illogical. Why would Jesus bother preaching to angels when they cannot repent or be restored to fellowship with God?

What Peter, Paul and Jesus Did Not Say

Neither Peter nor Paul informed us that Jesus suffered as a sinner in hell. In fact, quite the opposite—Peter claimed that the Messiah, prior to His descent into the lower world, was “made alive by the Spirit” (1 Pet. 3:18b). He was thus empowered by the Holy Spirit to descend into Sheol. Evidently, when He journeyed into that shadowy realm, He had already been freed from the shackles of sin and the curse. He was already alive spiritually, in perfect oneness with the Father. He descended, not as a victim, but as a victor. He was not overwhelmed by the darkness; He overpowered it.

Remember, Jesus did not tell the repentant thief, “This day you will witness me suffering in hell.” Rather, He rejoiced to declare, “Truly, I tell you, today you will be with Me in paradise” (Luke 23:43, MEV).

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