

Where did Jesus go between His death and resurrection?

Q: I always thought that when Jesus died He committed His spirit to the Father and went to heaven. But if that's the case, why do we say in the Apostles' Creed that "he descended into hell." Which is it? A: What can we say for certain about Jesus' location? Jesus said to the repentant rebel, "Today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). So the question is: "Where was paradise?"

Where Was Paradise

This isn't as easy to answer as you would think. The problem is that there is not agreement in the writings of the Jewish people about "paradise." Both before, during, and after Jesus' time, the term "paradise" has different locations and includes different people. Sometimes it is located in the distant East; sometimes identified with the third heaven; sometimes located on the perimeters of the circle of the earth-like a Greek view of the Elysian Fields. Sometimes it is talked about as a compartment of Hades (Hades being the place where all dead people went), that is, the happy side of Sheol where the righteous went upon death. Sometimes it is the home of the specially privileged few, the abode of those who haven't seen death, like Enoch & Elijah. What can we say for certain? If we go by Jewish literature, we can't say much with any certainty. The only agreement is this: it is the place of the righteous after death.

Key Passages

So what does the Bible say about where Jesus went and what he did between His death and resurrection? These are the key Scriptures that you should read:

Concerning the Old Testament saints ? 1 Samuel 28:3,13-15; Luke 16:19-31.

Concerning Jesus' location and activities ? Luke 23:43,46; Acts 2:24; John 20:17; perhaps 1 Peter 3:18-19.

Scriptures that equate paradise with heaven ? 2 Corinthians 12:2,4; Revelation 2:7.

Scriptures that (in my opinion) are taken out of context and don't apply ? Ephesians 4:8-10; 1 Peter 4:6.

I'd recommend reading the above Scriptures before you read the next section.

Two Acceptable Views

The two orthodox views of Jesus' location and what He did are the following:

Paradise was (and still is) the third heaven ? the place where God's throne room is located ? just as 2 Cor 12:2,4 and Rev 2:7 teach. Jesus committed His spirit to the Father (Luke 23:46) and His spirit went to where the Father was. On Sunday God reunited Jesus' spirit with His resurrected body ? just as ours will be.

In this view, the phrase "He descended into hell" in the Apostles' Creed refers not to after His death, but while Jesus was still on the cross. There, in the experience of forsakenness ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" Mark 15:34), the full torment of Hell was cast upon Jesus.

The strength of this view is that it is straightforward and uncomplicated. It follows the same pattern that all Christians will follow: our spirit goes to the Father, it remains with the Father until it is reunited with our bodies at our resurrection.

Paradise was a compartment in Hades. Hades was the place where all the dead went before the resurrection of Christ. The wicked went to a place of torment (Luke 16:22-23). The righteous went to "paradise," also called "Abraham's Bosom" (Luke 16:22), where they were conscious and were "comforted" (Luke 16:25). According to this view, when Jesus died His spirit went to the place in Hades where the righteous were.

Why did Jesus go to Hades? Perhaps to proclaim His victory to disobedient "spirits in prison," either human or demonic (1 Peter 3:18-22). He did this, however, while actually staying in the paradise precincts. At some point ? either the death of Jesus (Matthew 27:50-53) or the resurrection of Jesus or the ascension of Jesus ? Abraham's Bosom was emptied and all the Old Testament saints were led into heaven. Heaven is now the new location of paradise (2 Cor 12:2,4; Rev 2:7). After the taking of the righteous to heaven there is only one area of Hades left, the place of torment. The unrighteous dead await final judgment in Hades, when Hades will be cast into the "lake of fire" (Rev 20:14), or "hell."

According to this view, the meaning of the phrase "He descended into hell" is that Jesus' body died and though His body was still on earth in a tomb, His spirit literally descended into Hades. This may be the meaning of Peter's comment about "the agony of death" that Jesus was freed from (Acts 2:24). Death itself was an "agony" that He suffered with the righteous in paradise until the third day. The Westminster Shorter Catechism says that Jesus' humiliation consisted of, among other things, receiving "the wrath of God and the cursed death of the cross, in being buried, and

continuing under the power of death for a time" (Q27). The Larger Catechism, with its larger answer puts it, "Christ's humiliation after his death consisted in his being buried, and continuing in the state of death, and under the power of death till the third day; which hath been expressed in the words, He descended into hell" (Q50). Many hold this second view with the difference that Christ's proclamation in Hades (1 Peter 3:19) was to the Old Testament saints who needed to hear the gospel in order to be saved. This is not taught in the Bible. Instead the Bible clearly teaches that the Old Testament saints were saved through faith in the promises of God (which included the coming Messiah) ? for example, see Acts 4:12; Romans 3:10-12,19-20; 4:3-8,23-24; 10:11; 2 Corinthians 6:2; Galatians 3:6-11; Hebrews 10:1-12.

Bottom Line

Where was Jesus' spirit and what did He do? We aren't given a lot of clear information ? just as we aren't told where Jesus is between resurrection appearances. In my opinion, the evidence is so scanty that we can't be dogmatic. Either of the above views has been considered orthodoxy by the Christian church, although one denomination may embrace one view or the other.

Both views agree that heaven and paradise are now the same place and that this is where the souls of dying believers immediately go to be with Christ (2 Cor 5:6-8; Phil 1:23-24). We can be unified on this point. And we can also say, as Michael Horton writes in his book on the Apostles' Creed, "His hell gained our heaven; his curse secured our blessing; his incalculable grief brought us immeasurable joy." (We Believe, pp 101-102.)