

The Location of Hades

A Study of Ephesians 4:8-10

This difficult passage has been understood by Bible interpreters in various ways. The best solution is to compare Scripture with Scripture, which I have endeavored to do in this study. May the Lord help us to understand these verses. Peter once wrote about Paul's writings: "Our beloved brother Paul according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, **in which are some things hard to be understood**" (2 Peter 3:15-16). These three verses might be included among things which Paul wrote which are hard to be understood. May the Lord give us understanding in all things (2 Tim. 2:7)!

In these three verses (Eph. 4:8-10) the words "ascended" and "descended" are found five times. To ascend means to go up; to descend means to go down. Verse 8 says that Christ ascended up on high, that is, He returned to heaven from whence He had come. When He ascended He did two things: 1) He led captivity captive, or as one translation says, "He took many captives with Him." 2) He gave gifts unto men.

Verses 9-10 are parenthetical; the main thought goes from verse 8 to verse 11. He gave gifts unto men (v. 8) and these gifts are enumerated in verse 11 where four types of gifted men are listed.

The real difficulty is in the first phrase in verse 8. When Jesus ascended on high, He led captivity captive. The ascended Jesus captured the captives (so to speak) and led them away. Who were these captives that Jesus led away when He ascended?

We need to determine whether these captives were friends or foes. Many say that these captives were the Lord's enemies. However, when Jesus ascended to heaven, there is no evidence that He led Satan to heaven, nor is there is evidence that He led demons to heaven. Also, there is no evidence that He led the souls of the unsaved to heaven, because those souls, even today, remain in a place called Hades.

Because Christ paid the penalty for sins and because of His glorious resurrection, Christ was able to lead a large group of people to heaven. This would include men such as Noah, Abraham, David, Isaiah and even John the Baptist. These Old Testament saints were not the Lord's enemies, but His friends. However, they were "captives" in a place called Hades.

Consider carefully Luke 16:22-26. When Old Testament saints died, they would go to Sheol (the Old Testament Hebrew term) or Hades (the equivalent Greek term used in the New Testament), to a place here called Abraham's bosom. Hades (translated as "hell" in the KJV in verse 23) had two compartments, one for the saved (a place of comfort) and one for the unsaved (a place of torment and flames). The saved people in Hades were waiting for a great event, even the death of Christ when their sins would be paid for. The unsaved people in Hades are also waiting for a great event which has not taken place yet, even the Great White Throne judgment.

In what sense were Old Testament saints captives in Hades? Hades was a place for the souls of the saved. It was a place of comfort, not a place of punishment. It was not some kind of purgatory. It was a place of fellowship, called Abraham's bosom. It was not a bad place to be, but those saints in Hades were captives in the sense that they could not get out of there. They were confined to that place until Christ would come and capture them (so to speak) and lead them out. And that great event took place after our Lord's death and resurrection, when the Lord ascended on high.

"Upon this rock I will build My Church, and **the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it**" (Matthew 16:18). The gates of Hades most certainly did prevail against Old Testament saints because when they died, they went through those gates, never to come out until Christ captured them and brought them out after His death and resurrection. But for every member of the Church of Jesus Christ, the gates of Hades will not prevail against them because when they die, they will never pass through those gates. Instead, they will go immediately to heaven. Unbelievers today will pass through the gates of Hades and enter into that place of torment and flames, but believers today will never go to Hades because when they die, they go to be with Christ which is far better, being absent from the body but present with the Lord (Philippians 1:21-23; 2 Corinthians 5:8).

Consider Luke 23:42-43. Where did the saved thief on the cross go? He went to paradise, a place of blessing and comfort, also called Abraham's bosom. This was the compartment of Hades where saved Old Testament believers would go. Please note that this saved thief was not a member of the Church; he would still be considered an Old Testament saint. The Church did not begin until Pentecost. Jesus promised that this saved thief would be in paradise with Him. Actually, Jesus got there first because when the Roman soldiers came they found that He had already died. The saved thief had not yet died, so they broke his legs which hastened his death (John 19:32-33). The saved thief then went to Hades and the Lord was already there to welcome him. Jesus said, "Today you will be with Me in paradise." When Jesus died, He went to Hades/paradise/Abraham's bosom. More evidence for this will be discussed later in Acts chapter 2.

Christ ascended on high (Eph. 4:8), but before He ascended He descended (Eph. 4:9-10). He came down all the way to this earth and even lower. In Ephesians 4:9 we read—"He descended into the lower parts of the earth." This is one of the phrases that is problematic. There are many Bible interpreters who believe this phrase means that Christ descended to the earth, and no lower. They would understand the phrase as an appositional genitive: Christ descended into the lower parts, that is to say, the earth. Before He ascended to heaven, He first came all the way down to the lower parts, that is, He came all the way down to the earth. So, according to this understanding, the lower parts is equivalent to the earth. Yet, if Paul meant the earth, why didn't he just say so? Why didn't Paul just say, "He descended first to the earth"?

The more natural understanding is to see this phrase as a partitive genitive, namely that there are parts of the earth that are lower. This would mean that Jesus went even lower than the surface of the earth. If I tell my wife, "You can find me in the lower parts of the hospital," she would probably look for me somewhere in the basement. If she asked me to find the celery in the lower part of the refrigerator, I would look for the celery in one of the lower drawers. If we were to speak about the lower parts of the ocean, wouldn't we be talking about the bottom of the sea? The lower parts of the earth refer to an underworld, located in the earth's interior. More will be said about this shortly.

First the Lord descended, and then He ascended (Eph. 4:9-10). Let's first look at how far down our Lord descended. Consider Philippians 2:5-7. It's hard to comprehend what went through the minds of angels when their Creator, the Lord of Glory, left His throne and came down to earth. Remember, Jesus was the One whom Isaiah saw high and lifted up on His throne (John 12:41). What must the angels have thought when Christ left His glorious throne, came all the way down to this earth, humbled Himself and was born as a tiny, helpless human infant. As the hymnwriter said, "Oh what wonder, what amazement, who can count the priceless cost, when my God left heaven's glory for the manger and the cross." The attention of all the angels was fixed on this amazing event which we call the incarnation, God becoming a man. Yet, our Lord went even lower. He humbled Himself and the immortal One died. It was the most shameful death imaginable. Crucifixion was for criminals, for those considered the scum of the earth. Roman citizens would never face such a humiliating death. But after Christ died such a shameful death and finished the work of redemption, He then went even lower. He went under the earth.

According to Philippians 2:10, there are intelligent beings under the earth that will someday bow the knee to Christ. These unsaved people are now located under the earth, in Hades.

The Apostle's Creed says: "He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; He descended to hell." This is correct, as long as you understand "Hell" to be referring to Hades. Christ did descend to Hades.

Consider Acts 2:26-31. These words were written by David in Psalm 16. However, as Peter pointed out, these words apply to Jesus Christ and could not apply to David who had been dead and buried for about a thousand years. When Christ died, His body went to the grave, but His soul went to Hades, also called Abraham's bosom or paradise. God did not leave His soul in Hades for long, only for three days, and then the resurrection took place. Yet Christ was there for a short time.

Where is Hades located? Many times the Old Testament speaks of **going down** into Sheol (Sheol is the Old Testament Hebrew word which is equivalent to Hades). Here are some examples of many: Jacob said, after he thought Joseph his son had died, "I will **go down** into Sheol unto my son" (Genesis 37:35). "Thou has delivered my soul from the lowest Sheol" (or from the depths of Sheol)—Psalm 86:13. "Her guests are in the depths of Sheol" (Prov. 9:18). "It is as high as heaven, deeper than Sheol" (Job. 11:8). Just as heaven is high above the earth, so Sheol/Hades is deep within the earth.¹

Consider Matthew 12:40 where we are told that Jesus was three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. We have already seen that after He died, Christ went to Hades. Where was that place located? Jonah was in the interior of the whale, in the whale's belly. Where was Jesus? In the heart of the earth or in the interior of the earth. The word "heart" refers to the interior, to the center. There are many Bible scholars who believe that the heart of the earth merely refers to our Lord's grave. And certainly, His body was in the grave three days and three nights. Was Jesus here referring to the grave, where His body would be or was He referring to Hades where His soul would be? Remember, our Lord was buried on the surface of the earth; He was laid in a tomb in Jerusalem which was 2400 feet above sea level. Does that burial site fit the expression "the heart of the earth"? Christ's tomb was actually on the surface of the earth.

If we were to speak about the heart of an apple, would not we be referring to the core of the apple and not a place just under the skin of the apple? Webster's original dictionary of 1828 has this for the second definition of the word "heart": "The inner part of anything; the middle part or interior; as the heart of a country, kingdom or empire; the heart of a town, the heart of a tree." If we were to speak about the explorer, David Livingston, going

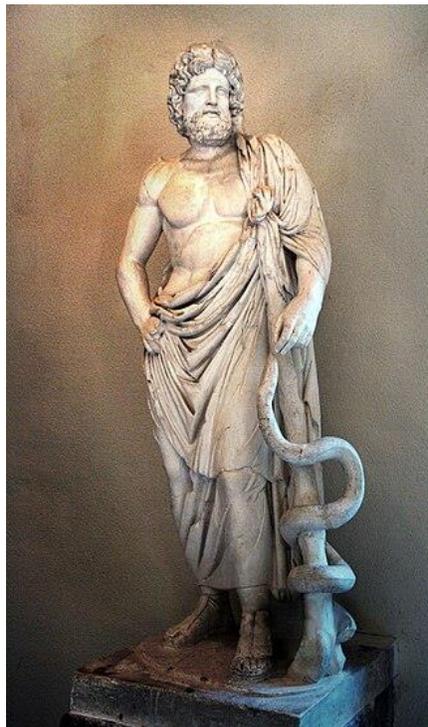
¹ The fact that Sheol and Hades are equivalent terms is seen in Acts 2:27 which is a quote from Psalm 16:10 where the Hebrew term Sheol is used. The Greek term used in Acts 2:27 is Hades.

into the heart of Africa, we would obviously be talking about this explorer going **deep** into that continent. Hades is located in the heart of the earth, deep in the earth.

We can anticipate an objection. **Do you really believe in an underworld? That's part of Greek mythology!** It's true that the Greeks believed in an underworld. They actually called the underworld Hades. The god of the underworld was also called Hades (his other name was Pluto). The Greeks believed that Hades was the abode of the dead.

Here is my understanding: ***The Greeks got their concept of Hades from the Hebrews and ultimately from God.*** Centuries before the Greeks came along, the Hebrews knew about the underworld which they called Sheol. Jacob, more than 1800 years before Christ, spoke about going down into Sheol to be with his son Joseph whom he thought had died (Gen. 37:35).

Here is another example showing how the Greeks borrowed from the Hebrews. The Greeks have a symbol for healing. It is a serpent wrapped around a pole. The Greek god Asclepius was a deity associated with healing and medicinal arts in ancient Greek religion and mythology. Asclepius is pictured below holding a pole with a serpent wrapped around it.



You might also see two serpents wrapped around a pole with wings.



Where do you suppose the Greeks got this symbol of healing from? Remember, Moses had a bronze serpent wrapped around a pole and when the Israelites looked at that serpent they were healed (Numbers 21). The Greeks could take God's truth and then make it part of their mythology. They could also distort the truth, as in the above photo, by having two serpents instead of one. Evidently, they got their symbol of healing from the Hebrews.

After our Lord spent three short days in the depths of the earth, He then began His ascent. The resurrection put Him back on the surface of the earth where His soul joined His resurrected body. Then forty days later He ascended to the Father's throne, was received up into glory and sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on High. He was highly exalted and given a name that was above every name. One of the things He accomplished was to bring the souls of Old Testament saints to heaven.

Consider 2 Corinthians 12:2-4. According to this passage, the location of paradise has changed. It is no longer located in Hades, in Abraham's bosom. It is now located in the third heaven. Today the thief on the cross is still in paradise, but which is not now in Hades, but rather located in the third heaven. We, too, are just a heartbeat away from joining these saints in that same place. We will get there either by death or by rapture; even so come, Lord Jesus! --George Zeller, May 2024

If you would like to learn more about what the Bible teaches concerning Hades, including much more detailed information about Ephesians 4:8-10, I would recommend the following study: "Excursus on Hades" which is found in *Lange's Commentary on the Holy Scriptures* (Vol. 12—James through Revelation), published by Zondervan (1960); see pages 364 and following.