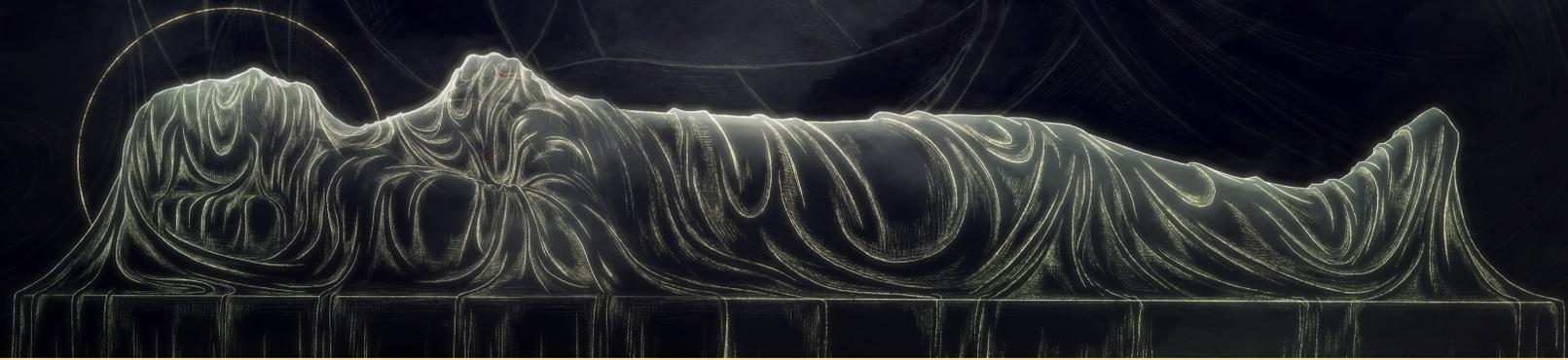


HOLY SATURDAY

- DISCUSSION GUIDE -



This discussion guide is intended to help individuals and small groups press a bit deeper into the issues addressed in the animation, *Holy Saturday*. My hope is that the comments and questions in this guide will help you understand how the imagery in this animation and the teaching of scripture intersect to highlight the soul-satisfying beauty of God in the crucified and risen Son.

Do not feel that you need to discuss every question or each point; they are simply intended to be springboards and suggestions for further thought. May this animation and guide be a means for you to more truly know, love, and be conformed to the glory of God in Jesus Christ.



Introduction

The descent of Christ to Sheol upon his death and what was accomplished by that descent, is a topic of interest, confusion, and misunderstanding in much of the evangelical Church. Did Jesus really “descend to hell” as the Apostles’ Creed says? Did He give the people who had died in the ages before His incarnation a chance to believe the Gospel? Did He skip that all together and enter directly into the Father’s presence? These and many other questions come to mind when we approach the topic of Christ’s Descent.

“Holy Saturday” is an animation, not a lecture on the history of the doctrine of the Descent, as such, it will leave many of these questions unanswered (and even unasked). However, what I hope it *can* do is to focus our minds, hearts, and imaginations on those mysterious and wonderful things that Scripture clearly ascribes to the achievement of our Lord’s death, and that it might aid our contemplation of the beauty of who God is and what He has done in Jesus Christ.

The more fantastical scenes depicted in this animation (i.e., the human spirit of Jesus descending into the halls of Sheol, the myriad ghostly shades, Christ’s raising up Adam and Eve, and the illumination of the dead caverns with the light of the crucified and risen Lord) are not intended to portray actual historic events, but to symbolically convey the spiritual significance of what Christ’s death achieved. Certainly and historically, Jesus was crucified, buried, and raised...but did his spirit fall down into a dimly light cavern of murmuring spirits where He found and rescued the progenitors of the race? That I do not know. However, I *do* know that—because of his death, burial, and resurrection—all who have or will ever trust in YHWH are no longer languishing in the forgetful shadows of Sheol, but rejoicing in the presence of the God who is their life. That is the sure truth of the Gospel, and that is the reality that I seek to depict through the (admittedly speculative) imagery of this animation. Grace to you as you watch, contemplate, discuss, and—I pray—grow in your knowledge and love of the Lord.



I. The Death of Death through the Death of Life

Read — Isaiah 25:6-9; Hebrews 2:14-15

Everything we are going to consider in this animation is grounded on the fact that, through His death and the subsequent resurrection secured by that death, Jesus Christ—who is Life itself, John 14:6—has swallowed up, over come, and put to death Death itself. The plundering of Sheol depicted in this animation is possible only on the basis of Christ’s sin-bearing, wrath-absorbing, resurrection-securing, God-revealing, reality-consummating crucifixion. So, before we say anything else, we need to consider the death of Death that is achieved through the death of Life.

Questions —

1. What is the “covering” and “veil” cast over all the world in Isaiah 25:7? How does this use of imagery alter your thoughts about death? In verses 7-8, Isaiah says that Yahweh will “swallow up” the covering of death. How is this language particularly fitting for what Jesus achieves on Calvary? In Isaiah 25:6-8, what is the “food” that Yahweh eats? What is the food that his people eat? How does this imagery anticipate the achievements of the cross of Christ?
2. In considering Hebrews 2:14-15, what kind of “slavery” might the fear of death cause in people’s lives? How does Jesus’ death set people free from the fear of death? (Consider Hebrews 2:9 also). We will consider this last point more fully below.
3. How does the picture above symbolically illustrate some of these concepts?



II. God With Us

Read — *Mark 15:45-47; 2 Corinthians 5:14-15; Hebrews 2:9*

Typically when we think of the phrase “God With Us,” we think of the birth of God the Son as the God-Man, Jesus of Nazareth. That is certainly true. The incarnation of God as a Man is the work of God upon which all of creation is grounded, it is the decisive movement of self-giving love by which He comes to and shares His own life with His creatures.

However, God’s being *with* us does not end with the Son’s birth as a man....One of the truths that the crucifixion and burial of Christ teaches us is that Jesus is Immanuel—*God With Us*—even on the death bed; He is *God With Us* in the cold embrace of the grave; and He is *God With Us* in that moment into which no one else can follow, in the severance of body and spirit and our entrance into whatever mysteries await beyond our final breath. Because the Lord of Life became a corpse in the grave, there too, in and beyond Death’s Shadow, He is *God With Us*.

Questions —

1. In the passage from Mark’s Gospel, Jesus is referred to as “the corpse,” or “the body.” This is shocking language. **How does the fact that the one who is Himself *God* is referred to as a *corpse* impact your thinking about death? About the fact that you too will be a corpse one day?**

2. The passages from 2 Corinthians and Hebrews both refer to Jesus's death as somehow being everyone's death so that, His death counts as the death of all people. Now, if you're reading this, you haven't died yet...but these verses tell you that you can already—in a very real sense—see your death *in* the death of Jesus. His death *is* your death. **According to the verses above, what moved God in Christ to embrace our death in this way? What do these passages say is a result of His embrace of our death? How does thinking about the death of Jesus as *your death* embraced graciously in love by your God alter your thinking about your death (the death you haven't yet died, but which Christ has already died for you and which you “see” by faith whenever you consider the crucified Jesus)?**
3. **How does this teaching about Jesus as *God With Us* even at death and in the grave, accord with what you read in Psalm 139:7-12?**
4. **What are some thoughts or feelings that come to mind as you consider this picture? Does it impact your thinking about who Jesus is and what He's done? Does it impact your thinking about your own death or death in general?**



III. Descending to The Lower Parts of The Earth

Read — Psalm 6:5, Isaiah 38:18-19, Ephesians 4:9

The Bible never gives us a detailed explanation of what happens in the time between death and the final resurrection. Even with this lack of details, Christians know at least that upon death they will be conscious and joyful in the presence of the Lord, awaiting the fullness of their hope in the resurrection of their bodies on the New Heaven and Earth (Philippians 1:23, 2 Corinthians 5:1-9). This is true. However, the covenant people of God did not always have such a hope. Before the death and resurrection of Jesus, *all people*—whether faithful to YHWH or not—anticipated a shadowy afterlife called “Sheol” (or the “Pit” or just the “Grave”).

It seems that there was something like a Sheol of rest for the faithful (1 Kings 2:10) and a Sheol of unrest for the unfaithful (Ezekiel 32:24-25), but the Bible does not go beyond broad generalizations like this (many details were developed in extrabiblical thought, but that does not concern us right now. Also, see Jesus’s parable in Luke 16:19-31, however how far we should take the imagery in this parable, which is about the enduring significance of the OT Law, as an actual depiction of the pre-resurrection afterlife is not clear). In the Old Testament, Sheol seems to have been a place of forgetfulness, silence, darkness, solitude, and separation from the “world above”—for both righteous and wicked.

This is where the disembodied souls of all people went upon death before the resurrection of Jesus. We will consider below how Christ’s own death and resurrection has altered Sheol...but for now, we have to muse on the stunning truth that, as a man, Jesus Himself descended to Sheol upon His death. While the Son of God reigned in heaven, it was also true that—by virtue of His personal union to human nature—He lay bodily in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, even as He descended in his human spirit to the depths of Sheol, becoming one of the dead.

Questions —

1. If the Old Testament is clear that, after death, all humans would continue in some sort of conscious existence in Sheol, **why is it important that the soul of Jesus would also descend to this place? Could we say that Jesus had truly “tasted death” if he did not experience what His brothers and sisters experienced upon their deaths (Hebrews 2:9-12)?**
2. The teaching that Jesus descended to Sheol upon His death ultimately emphasizes the extent of God’s love for His people in that He not only dies their death, but that He also *enters death* with them, bringing His own presence even into the place of deepest darkness and hopelessness. **Read Psalm 139:7-12.** Though the Psalmist likely did not foresee what God would do in Jesus through the Gospel, **how does the concept of Jesus’s descent to Sheol upon His death influence the way we interpret this passage?**

I mentioned above that there seem to be two divisions in Sheol: a Sheol of rest for the righteous, and a Sheol of unrest or torment for the unrighteous. In this animation, I depict Jesus descending into the Sheol of the righteous, that is, those who died in faith awaiting the Messiah. What about those in the Sheol of torment? Are we to believe that there are humans who have sunk lower in suffering and darkness than Christ Himself has descended? No! Jesus bore in Himself and in His own experience the fullness of the wrath of God as He suffered on the cross. Thus, when Jesus endured the wrath of God on the cross, He truly “descended,” not only to the depths of the Sheol of torment, but also into the deepest trenches of the Lake of Fire itself. On the cross, Jesus endured damnation. In His burial, then, His human spirit—having already finished the absorption of divine wrath against the unrighteous on the cross (John 19:30)—went to the place of the righteous dead upon His burial.



IV. In Adam, All Die; In Christ, All Live

Read — 1 Corinthians 15:20-23

In this passage of 1 Corinthians, Paul makes a connection between Adam and Jesus (He makes the same connection in Romans 5:14-18). The idea is that, Just as Adam was the head of the human race, and just as Adam's sin leading to his death led to death coming to all people, so too Jesus is the head of a *new humanity*, and His righteousness leading to death *and resurrection* will lead to the resurrection of all people who are in Him.

One of the way Christian artists of the past have illustrated the resurrection of the new humanity in Christ is to show Jesus raising Adam and Eve up from Sheol. This is more than just a fanciful idea. Scripture indicates that Adam and Eve repented of their sin and came again to trust YHWH (Genesis 4:1-4, 26), which means they would have been among the souls in Sheol awaiting a savior when Jesus's own soul descended into their midst. We have every reason to believe, then, that whatever salvation Jesus brought to Sheol (the topic of our next study), Adam and Eve would have benefited from it.

What a symbolically powerful image to contemplate: Christ, the True Adam in whom all are raised from the dead, lifting up from the depths the old Adam, in whom all of humanity fell into death.

Questions —

1. **What is significant about what Adam and Eve are holding? What about the position in which Jesus is presented? How might these two elements of the picture be related?**
2. In this image, Jesus is rising up from the depths behind Adam and Eve, implying that He has descended even further into the darkness of Sheol than they are. **Why is this significant?**
3. Adam and Eve, while historic figures, are also symbolic of the entire human race, since all people who ever existed were, quite literally, *in* them. **With the symbolic significance of Adam and Eve in mind, how might you see and explain the gospel from this image?**
4. In a sense, all of redemptive history—from Genesis to Revelation—is pictured in this single scene, **can you see and explain some aspects of how that is the case?**



V. Raised Up In Him

Read — *Micah 2:13; 1 Corinthians 15:20-23*

We've already looked at this passage from 1 Corinthians, but this time I want to focus on a specific word in that passage, and that is the word "in." Notice that Paul says that all died *in* Adam, while all will be made alive *in* Jesus. The "in" is important because it tells us that both Adam and Jesus stand as representatives of a larger group and that what happens to *them*, in a very real sense, happens to all those whom they represent—all those who are *in* them.

When Adam sinned and incurred the punishment of death, all of humanity represented *in* him also entered into the sphere of sin and death. However, Jesus has come as the representative head of the new humanity (a humanity into which we enter by *faith* rather than *birth*), and what is true of Him is true of all those who are represented *in* Him. This is why Paul talks elsewhere of Jesus's death truly being *our* death if we are united to Him by faith (Galatians 2:20, for instance). But if His death is truly the death of all those who are in Him, then His resurrection from the dead is truly the resurrection of all those who are in Him as well. Jesus's story *is* the story of all those in union with Him.

Even though Jesus entered and experienced Sheol just like his brothers and sisters, he was not left in that place of darkness (Psalm 16:10-11). Jesus was the first human being *ever* to be raised *up* from Sheol and to return to life in a resurrected body. Think about it like a seed being planted in the ground. Whenever someone dies, it is like a seed going into the ground. There are a number of times in Scripture when a dead person is raised back to life; this is analogous to putting a seed in the ground and then digging it back out...it is still only a seed. Jesus, however, is the first and only human being to actually receive a resurrection body; He is the only seed who ever fell into the ground and then returned to the surface, not by being dug up, but by sprouting from the ground as a full, green plant.

Now, what does all of this have to do with Sheol? Just this, that when Jesus rose up from the depths of Sheol into the newness of resurrection life, He brought with Him all those who were awaiting the Messiah by faith. All the Old Testament saints who had died in faith (Hebrews 11:13) were raised up *in* Jesus and *with* Jesus, transferred to the joy-giving presence of their God where they wait, with post-cross saints, in expectation for the resurrection of their bodies. In a very real sense, Christ's ascension from Sheol was also their ascension from Sheol.

How do we know this has happened? Is there a verse in the Bible that says this explicitly? Though there are some possible references to this in Scripture, the strongest evidence for it comes when we simply consider the states of the souls of the righteous dead before and after Christ. As we've already seen, before Christ, those who died in faith went down into the shadowy realm of Sheol (Psalm 6:5). However, now when someone dies in faith, they are ushered into the joyful presence of the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8, Philippians 1:23, 1 Thessalonians 5:9-10)...indeed, the saints of the Old Testament are no longer languishing in Sheol, but are gathered in joy and holiness to the heavenly Zion (Hebrews 12:22-24). What brought about this change? The only answer seems to be Christ's own descent to ascent from Sheol (Acts 2:31-32, Ephesians 4:9).

Those who sat in the forgetful darkness of Sheol, awaiting a savior, finally saw the light of the Lord Himself descending into their midst—descending as one of them. And, having sought out the lowest places of the grave, having invaded the heart of Death with the presence of Life, Jesus was raised up again as the Head and Representative of the New Humanity, such that all those who had hoped in Him were now—in Him—lifted from the night of separation from God into the dawning light of His eternal presence.

Questions —

- 1. How do you see Micah 2:13 and 1 Corinthians 15:20-23 represented in this image?** We talked a bit about Jesus as the representative, in whose resurrection all who hope in Him are raised up, **in what sense is that concept present in this image?**
- 2. How does Christ's victory over the Grave as depicted in this animation have practical significance for your own thinking and feeling about death?** (For further thoughts on this, consider 1 Thessalonians 5:9-10)
- 3. In what sense might you say that this picture depicts the Gospel being proclaimed into the depths of Sheol?**
- 4. Let's return briefly to a verse we considered at the very beginning of our discussion, Hebrews 2:14-15. In those verses, we read that Jesus has set His people free from the fear of death. In that first discussion, we asked in what way Jesus set people free from the fear of Death. Having worked through this entire discussion guide, would you add anything new to your answer? Have you thought of death any differently as a result of this animation and discussion guide? If so, in what ways? Have you personally experienced this freedom from the fear of death that comes through faith union to Jesus Christ?**
- 5. John 1:18 teaches us that everything Jesus is and does—especially His death, burial, and resurrection—is an unfolding to us of the character and identity of God the Father. To see Jesus is to see God. With that in mind, how does the descent of Jesus into Sheol and His ascent from Sheol unfold to us more of the beauty of who God is?**