

EXCERPT

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“He Descended to the Dead” *An Evangelical Theology of Holy Saturday*

December 24, 2019 | \$30, 272 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5258-1

The descent of Jesus Christ to the dead has been a fundamental tenet of the Christian faith, as indicated by its inclusion in both the Apostles’ and Athanasian Creeds. But it has also been the subject of suspicion and scrutiny, especially from evangelicals. Led by the mystery and wonder of Holy Saturday, Matthew Emerson offers an exploration of the biblical, historical, theological, and practical implications of the descent.

Finding Comfort in Christ’s Descent

What, as Christians, can we say to those who face death, either their own or that of their loved ones? We certainly can give them the hope of Christ’s resurrection, if they or their loved one has trusted Christ in repentance and faith. We can also assure them that they do not grieve without hope because they, if they and their loved ones are Christ-followers, will one day see that loved one again. But here is what faces us in the meantime: the twin realizations that—unless we too pass on soon—we will not see them face to face for a long time and that this is because our loved ones no longer live bodily on this earth. Yes, they and we will be raised with Christ one day; yes, we have hope in the resurrection; and yes, they are with Christ. But on this last note, perhaps there is some further hope we can offer. Perhaps there is something more immediate than Christ’s second coming and believers’ resurrection to eternal life that we can preach to those grieving but not without hope. The hope that is more immediate, and one that is descriptive of our departed loved ones’ eternal state right now, not just some distant day, is that Christ, too, has experienced death. He did not just experience dying only to rise again moments later, but he actually remained dead in the grave. He did not simply have his breath expire and then immediately rise to glory, but his body was buried and his soul departed to the place of the dead. And because he is God in the flesh, he defeated the place of the dead and the grave by descending into them and then rising again on the third day. In the Christian tradition, this hope is known as the doctrine of Christ’s *descensus*—his descent to the dead.

Descents are everywhere. From Hercules and Orpheus venturing into Hades, to Harry Potter following the pipes down into the Chamber of Secrets, to the Sheriff and Joyce Byers frantically searching for Will in the Upside Down (in the Netflix series *Stranger Things*), we want our heroes to descend into the underworld, defeat the enemy, and rescue their loved ones. We want Maui to enter the Realm of Monsters and defeat Tamatoa in the Disney film *Moana*. We love seeing Doctor Strange enter the Dark Dimension, experience death *ad infinitum*, and thereby trick and defeat Mordo at the end of the film named after him. Our hearts swell while reading *The Silver Chair* as Jill and Eustace rescue Prince Rilian from Underland, and in *The Lord of the Rings* as Gandalf descends into the depths of Moria, gives up his own life to defeat the Balrog, and then rises again to save Middle-Earth. There is something fascinating about—a shared yearning for—a hero who can enter the underworld, defeat our enemies, and bring the dead back to life.

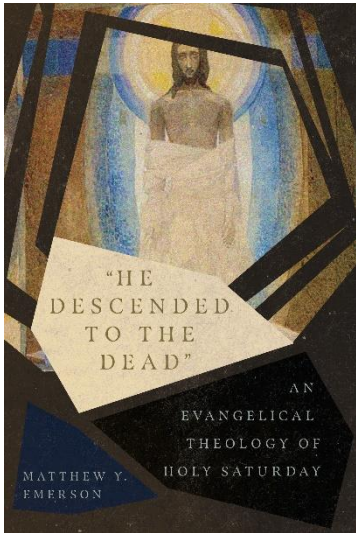
This descent motif, so popular in ancient and modern mythology, is also found in the historic events of the Bible, climaxing in Christ’s descent to the dead between his death and resurrection. It might seem like an odd thing to meditate on the fact that Jesus remained dead for three days, and yet that is what I have done for the past two years, nearly daily, many times hourly and by the minute. It may seem even stranger to hear that, over the course of that time, this doctrine has become a source of comfort, amazement, and worship of our Triune God for me. That God himself would descend in the incarnate Son to take on human flesh and all that entails, including not only dying but remaining dead, in order to redeem us from the curse of sin, is at the heart of the good news. God the Son first descended when he took on flesh, and in doing so he experienced all that humanity experiences, including death and its temporal state. What good news is this, that God vicariously experiences not only life but also death with us through the incarnate Son? What gospel do



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Christians proclaim, except that Jesus has defeated all rulers, authorities, principalities, and powers, including death itself, and that he does so through dying for sin, remaining dead, and rising from the dead? And what hope do Christians have for those who, unlike those who read these words, no longer live? We who follow Christ have the hope that Jesus already experienced death, the state of being dead, with and for those who trust in his atoning death and victorious resurrection. This doctrine moves me to be comforted in the face of death. This doctrine comforts me as I grieve with those who grieve and as I remember those to whom I’ve dedicated this book. And it moves me to worship and praise as I comprehend more deeply each day what it means for God the Son to take on human flesh “for us and for our salvation.”

And yet this doctrine has been nearly abandoned in many circles, particularly conservative evangelical ones. While the descent is making a bit of a comeback these days, it remains either under fire or ignored in many evangelical circles. Some demand its excision from the Apostles’ Creed, while others call for its radical revision to the point that it is redundant with “he died, and was buried.” In many evangelical colleges and seminaries, the phrase “he descended to the dead” is trounced as a capitulation to misguided Roman Catholic notions of the intermediate state, purgatory, and justification. The motivation for writing this book arose out of my ever-growing appreciation for the doctrine in the face of what seems like an increasingly full-on assault of the doctrine’s biblical and systematic viability. I began my inquiry into what the descent might mean if we recovered it as Protestant evangelicals in a paper at the 2015 Los Angeles Theology Conference, and my appreciation for and desire to recover the doctrine for evangelicals has grown since then. I hope in this book to show the biblical and historical warrant for the descent so that, in turn, we can see how vital this doctrine is for the confession and ministry of the church.

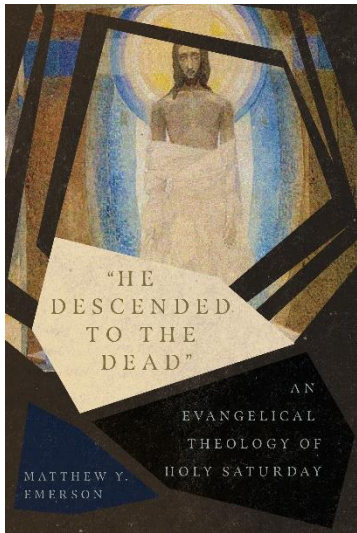
—Taken from the preface



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Matthew Y. Emerson (PhD, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary) is associate professor of religion at Oklahoma Baptist University. He is the author of *The Story of Scripture: An Introduction to Biblical Theology*, *Between the Cross and the Throne: The Book of Revelation*, and *Christ and the New Creation: A Canonical Approach to the Theology of the New Testament*.

“A treasure trove of biblical and theological wisdom!”

“It would be an understatement to say the descent of Christ is overlooked in the evangelical tradition. Emerson puts our eyes back on this important event and demonstrates how it is biblical, historical, and clarifies and informs other doctrines. Once you see the descent, it is hard to go back to neglecting it. This book shines a helpful light on this derelict doctrine. *Tolle lege.*”

—Patrick Schreiner, assistant professor of New Testament language and literature, Western Seminary

“Matthew Emerson has ably recovered a theology of Holy Saturday, Christ’s descent into the place of death, for churches that are normally suspicious about ancient creeds. He shows that it is biblical, theologically necessary, integral to the work of Christ, and even intrinsic to the very identity of the God we worship. A concise and convincing account of a contested topic.”

—Michael F. Bird, academic dean and lecturer in theology at Ridley College in Melbourne, Australia

“A treasure trove of biblical and theological wisdom! Matthew Emerson has read everything on the subject. For Catholics, his correction of Balthasar needs to be listened to—especially given that, with Balthasar and the creedal tradition, he insists upon the profound importance of Christ’s descent to the dead. This book is a word that needs saying in our death-despairing age.”

—Matthew Levering, James N. and Mary D. Perry Jr. Chair of Theology, Mundelein Seminary

“Emerson’s book retrieves a seriously neglected yet helpful doctrine—Christ’s descent to the dead—with exegetical insight, theological acumen, and a pastoral heart. I highly recommend it.”

—Walter R. Strickland II, associate vice president for Kingdom Diversity Initiatives and assistant professor, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

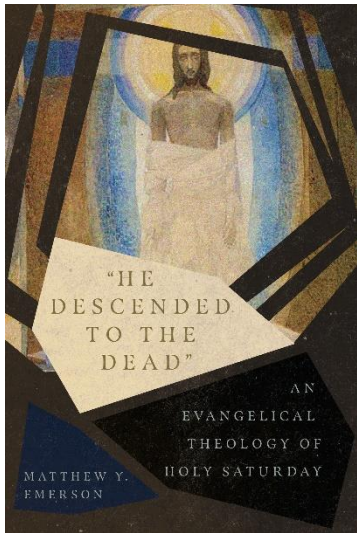
“I can’t recall the last time I read a new book that gave me so much insight into an event from the mission of Jesus Christ. In this retrieval of the doctrine of Christ’s descent to the dead, Emerson clears away misconceptions, corrects erroneous interpretations, establishes solid foundations, and explores the vast implications of this single line of the classic creed. This book deserves a wide readership but will be especially helpful for evangelicals who have mumbled their way through, or have misunderstood, the creedal descent clause.”

—Fred Sanders, professor at the Torrey Honors Institute, Biola University



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“Matthew Emerson has given us here a major study of the historic, but too often distorted and neglected, doctrine of the descent of Jesus Christ to the dead. In doing so, he demonstrates the coinherence of biblical and historical theology and their relevance for the Christian life.”

—**Timothy George**, founding dean of Beeson Divinity School of Samford University and general editor of the *Reformation Commentary on Scripture*

“This is a tour de force! Emerson has given us a superbly written, incisively argued volume that makes the case for a doctrine that is often neglected or rejected outright by Protestants, illuminating many facets of its theological, liturgical, and pastoral importance along the way. Not everyone will agree with all the details, but this is an outstanding biblical, historical, and theological survey of Christ’s descent to the dead. I expect it to become the benchmark Protestant account of the subject for years to come, and it also opens up rich and fruitful avenues for further exploration.”

—**Suzanne McDonald**, professor of systematic and historical theology at Western Theological Seminary



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