

## The Apostles' Creed: He descended into hell (9)

*I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth*

*I believe in Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son, our Lord*

*Who was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary*

*He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; **He descended into hell***

*The third day He rose again from the dead*

*He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty*

*He will come again to judge the living and the dead*

*I believe in the Holy Spirit*

*The holy catholic Church; the communion of saints*

*The forgiveness of sins*

*The resurrection of the body*

*And the life everlasting*

- Having considered the mind-stretching doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, the awe striking mystery of the eternal generation and uniqueness of the Son, the interesting characteristic of the Creed jumping from “womb to tomb” when considering the life of Christ, and then the peculiar observation that the only two persons mentioned by name in the Creed, other than the members of the Godhead, are the virgin Mary and Pontius Pilate—the one who gave Him life (humanly speaking) and the one who took His life (humanly speaking)—we come in this study to the most controversial section of the Apostles' Creed: *He descended into hell*.
- That the controversial nature of this statement is not a new thing is evidenced by the fact that it was the final part of the Creed to be accepted by the Church. Indeed, the following statement of Calvin concerning this phrase will at the same time acknowledge the controversial nature of this phrase and set the trajectory of our present study:

...it appears from the ancient writers that this phrase which we read in the Creed was once not so much used in the churches. Nevertheless, in setting forth a summary of doctrine a place must be given to it, as it contains the useful and not-to-be-despised mystery of a most important matter, at least some of the old writers do not leave it out. From this we may conjecture that it was inserted after a time, and did not become customary in the churches at once, but gradually. This much is certain: that it reflected the common belief of all the godly; for there is no one of the fathers who does not mention in his writings Christ's descent into hell, though their interpretations vary. But it matters little by whom or at what time this clause was inserted. Rather, the noteworthy point about the Creed is this: we have in it a summary of our faith, full and complete in all details; and containing nothing in it except what has been derived from the pure Word of God. If any persons have scruples about admitting this article into the Creed, it will soon be made plain how important it is to the sum of our redemption: if it is left out, much of the benefit of Christ's death will be lost. (*Institutes*, Bk 2, Chpt. 16)

- As Calvin alludes to above, various interpretations of the descent can be found throughout the Church's history. Some of the early Church fathers taught that after Jesus was buried bodily, He went to a place called the *Limbus Patrum* (Lit. “Border of the Fathers”). The idea behind *Limbus Patrum* was that after the saints in the OT died they went into a sort of holding area awaiting Christ's death so that they could finally get to heaven. That is, there was a sort of border that blocked their way into heaven. Therefore, this view of Christ's descent into hell is that when Christ finally came and died He then descended to this place—*Limbus Patrum*—and led the OT believers out and into heaven.
- Another view, which is similar to the previous one, is that Christ descended into hell to proclaim His victory over Satan and the demons. And still another related view is that Christ went down into hell to preach a “second chance” of salvation for those who died and had ended up in a place of torment.
- All of the foregoing views (and others that have not been mentioned) assert some idea of Jesus literally descending into a subterranean place, between His burial and resurrection, to accomplish some further aspect of redemptive work. And, each of these views has been built upon an obscure biblical passage, which upon scrutiny does not adequately support it.
- For instance, the mention of “*Abraham's Bosom*”, “*Hades*”, and “*a great chasm*” between those two places in Luke 16, is the primary biblical text upon which the Roman Catholic *Limbus Patrum* has been built. There are at least two problems with freighting this text with that doctrine: First, there is a debate over the very nature of the passage. In other words, is this a parable or is this a real historical account?<sup>1</sup> Secondly, there are no accounts in the OT that support the idea that saints thought they were going to go into a holding area before going to be with the LORD in heaven...in fact the evidence points in the opposite direction (e.g. Gen. 5:24; Ps. 16:9-11; 17:15; 49:15; 73:24-26;

<sup>1</sup> I take the position that this is a parable which confronts three interrelated mistakes that we tend to make in our thinking: First it confronts our mistaken assumptions about the nature of **life**. Secondly it confronts our mistaken assumptions about the nature of **death**. And thirdly—and most importantly—it confronts our mistaken assumptions about the nature of **faith**.

Heb. 11:13-16). Thus, this passage can be and should be read against the broader biblical context to be referring to the separation between heaven and hell, not two compartments within a pre-heaven or hell holding area.

- In Ephesians 4:8-10 we read, ...it says, “When He ascended on high He led a host of captives, and He gave gifts to men.” (In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that He had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? [older translations have this “the lower parts of the earth”] He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.) It is thought (specifically in the Lutheran view) that this describes a descent of Jesus into the region of Hell to proclaim His victory over Satan and the demons. The problem with this interpretation, which is corrected in most of the modern translations, is that it doesn’t compare Scripture with Scripture. When we take into consideration the many other biblical instances of “the lower parts of the earth”, it becomes clear that this refers simply to the earth or of dying and going into the grave, and not a lower, subterranean region: *I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.* (Ps. 139:14-15); *Sing, O heavens, for the Lord has done it; shout, O depths of the earth; break forth into singing, O mountains, O forest, and every tree in it! For the Lord has redeemed Jacob, and will be glorified in Israel* (Isa. 44:23); *But those who seek to destroy my life shall go down into the depths of the earth;* (Ps. 63:9); *For they are all given over to death, to the world below, among the children of man, with those who go down to the pit.* (Eze. 31:14). Indeed, Jesus defines His “descent” to the earth as His incarnation: *No one has ascended into heaven except Him who descended from heaven, the Son of Man* (Jn. 3:13). Therefore we should understand this passage in Ephesians as referring to Jesus' incarnation and exaltation.<sup>2</sup>
- The final passage that is brought forward to support the idea that Jesus descended into a literal place under the earth is 1 Peter 3:18-19: *For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which He went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison.* This passage has particularly been used to try to prove a “second-chance” idea of the descent of Christ. That is, He descended into Hell to preach the Gospel to those there, providing them a second chance at salvation. Of this passage, Luther said, “A wonderful text is this, and a more obscure passage perhaps than any other in the New Testament, so that I do not know for certainty just what Peter means.”<sup>3</sup> With most Reformed expositors, I believe that this passage teaches that during the time when Noah was building the ark, Christ was ‘in the Spirit’ preaching righteousness and repentance through Noah to unbelievers who were on earth then, but who are spirits in Hell now.<sup>4</sup> Regardless of whether this is the correct interpretation the fact of the matter is that this is far too obscure a text to build a literal descent-of-Christ-into-hell doctrine upon.
- So, what does the Creed mean when it says, *He descended into hell*? Two of the best answers are provided by two of the most beloved Reformed symbols:

#### Heidelberg Catechism Q & A #44 **Why is there added, "He descended into hell"?**

**Answer:** That in my greatest temptations, I may be assured, and wholly comfort myself in this, that my Lord Jesus Christ, by his inexpressible anguish, pains, terrors, and hellish agonies, in which He was plunged during all His sufferings, but especially on the cross, has delivered me from the anguish and torments of hell.

#### Westminster Larger Catechism Q & A #50 **Wherein consisted Christ's humiliation after his death?**

**Answer:** Christ's humiliation after his death consisted in his being buried, and continuing in the state of the dead, and under the power of death till the third day; which hath been otherwise expressed in these words, *He descended into hell*.

- Thus, the two-fold understanding of this phrase is that it covers both the suffering of Christ on the cross and His continuing under death for a time after He died. In other words, this phrase is added so that we might affirm that Christ suffered more than merely physical death at the hands of Pilate, but also divine wrath (hell) at the hand of God. And, being made like His brethren in all things, yet without sin, Jesus also experienced the descent into the realm of death that all men experience at their deaths. In a word, this affirms that in both body and soul, Jesus really bore the penalty for the sins of His people and descended into the grave, passing into the realm of death.
- As J.I. Packer has said, “What the Creed means... is that Jesus entered, not *Gehenna* [Lit. Hell], but *Hades* [Lit. the realm of death]—that is, that He really died, and that it was from a genuine death, not a simulated one, that He rose.”<sup>5</sup>
- This phrase is a necessary component of our faith in that it articulates the fact that in His sufferings—in both soul and body—Jesus bore the wrath of God in our place (Heb. 2:17) and fully tasted death for us (Heb. 2:9).

<sup>2</sup> See Daniel Hyde, “In Defense of the Descendit” *The Confessional Presbyterian*, Vol. 3, p. 109-110.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther, *Commentary on Peter & Jude*, p. 166.

<sup>4</sup> See my sermon “An Answer to a Tough Question” on 1 Peter 3:18-20.

<sup>5</sup> *Growing in Christ*, p. 56