

The Apostles' Creed

He Descended into Hell

Selected Texts

Rev. Freddy Fritz

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He Descended into Hell

Introduction

As we continue our series in *The Apostles' Creed* I would like to examine today what it means when we say that “**he descended into hell.**” Please listen as I recite the Apostles' Creed:

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

*I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
and born of the Virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was 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.
From there he will come 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. Amen.*

Today we affirmed our Christian faith in the words of the Apostles' Creed. In doing so, we joined with Christians all over the world and throughout the centuries in affirming our faith in the persons and works of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. In affirming our faith in Jesus Christ, we affirmed, in part, the following: “*I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our*

*Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and born of the virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; **he descended into hell**. The third day he rose again from the dead.”*

Lesson

It is sometimes argued that Christ descended into hell after he died. In fact, this is what the Apostles’ Creed states: **“He descended into hell.”**

The question I want to pose and then answer today is: Did Christ in fact descend into hell? Did Christ endure further suffering in hell after his death on the cross?

I propose that we study this question by examining:

- The Origin of the Phrase—“He Descended Into Hell”
- Possible Biblical Support for “He Descended Into Hell”
- Biblical Opposition to “He Descended Into Hell”

I. The Origin of the Phrase—“He Descended Into Hell”

So, first, let’s examine the origin of the phrase—**“He descended into hell.”**

The first thing to note is that the phrase **“he descended into hell”** does *not* actually occur in the Bible.

A murky background lies behind much of the history of the phrase itself. Its origins, where they can be found, are far from praiseworthy.

Unlike the Nicene Creed or the Chalcedonian Definition, the Apostles’ Creed was not written or approved by a single Church Council at one specific time. Instead, it gradually took shape from about the second century AD until about the seventh century AD.

It is surprising to find that the phrase **“he descended into hell”** was not found in any of the early versions of the Apostles’ Creed. It first appeared in the Fourth Formula of Sirmium, the so-

called Dated Creed of 359 AD.¹ It was not until about 650 AD that it was commonly found in widespread use in the Apostles' Creed.

Now, Rufinus, who wrote a commentary on the Apostles' Creed in about 404 AD, did not think that it meant that Christ descended into hell, but understood the phrase simply to mean that Christ was "buried." In other words, he took it to mean that Christ "descended into the grave." (The Greek form of the Apostles' Creed uses the word *hades*, which can mean just "grave," not *gehenna*, which means "hell, the place of punishment").

As one continues to survey the use of the Apostles' Creed, it seems that when the phrase "**he descended into hell**" began to be more commonly used, it may have been in versions (now lost to us) that did not have the expression "and buried." In other words, the creed used only one of the two expressions to signify Christ's burial. But later when "**he descended into hell**" was used in a version of the creed that already had the phrase "and buried," some other explanation had to be given to it. This mistaken insertion of the phrase after the words "and buried" was apparently done around 650 AD—led to all sorts of attempts to explain "**he descended into hell**" in some way that did not contradict Scripture.

Some have taken the phrase "**he descended into hell**" to mean that Christ suffered the pains of hell while on the cross. John Calvin, for example, says that "Christ's descent into hell" refers to the fact that he not only died a bodily death but that "it was expedient at the same time for him to undergo the severity of God's vengeance, to appease his wrath and satisfy his just judgment."²

Similarly, the Heidelberg Catechism, Question 44, asks: *Why does the creed add, "He descended to hell?"* The answer:

To assure me in times of personal crisis and temptation that Christ my Lord, by suffering unspeakable anguish and pain, and terror of soul, especially on the cross but also earlier, has delivered me from the anguish and torment of hell.

¹ Rufinus, *A Commentary on the Apostles' Creed* (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1954), 121.

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.515 (2.16.10).

But is this a satisfactory explanation of the phrase “**he descended into hell**”? While it is true that Christ suffered the outpouring of God’s wrath on the cross, this explanation does not really fit the phrase in the Apostles’ Creed. It does not explain in which way Christ “**descended.**” And furthermore, the statement (and interpretation) seems artificial and unnecessary after “was crucified, died, and was buried.”

Others have understood it to mean that Christ continued in the “state of death” until his resurrection. This is the position of the Westminster Larger Catechism, Question 50:

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.*

Though it is true that Christ continued in the state of death until the third day, once again it is a strained and unpersuasive explanation of “**he descended into hell,**” for the placement of the phrase would then give the awkward sense, “he was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to being dead.” This interpretation does not explain what the words first meant in this sequence but it is rather an unconvincing attempt to salvage some theologically acceptable sense out of them.

Moreover, the English word “hell” has no such sense as simply “being dead” (though the Greek word *hades* can mean this), so this becomes a doubly artificial explanation for English-speaking people.

Finally, some have argued that the phrase means just what it appears to mean on first reading: that Christ actually and literally did descend into hell after his death on the cross. It is easy to understand the Apostles’ Creed to mean just this (indeed, that is certainly the natural sense), but then another question arises: Can this idea be supported from Scripture?

II. Possible Biblical Support for “He Descended Into Hell”

So, let us now examine possible biblical support for “**he descended into hell.**”

Support for the idea that Christ descended into hell has been found in primarily five passages: Acts 2:27; Romans 10:6-7; Ephesians 4:9; 1 Peter 3:18-20; and 1 Peter 4:6. (A few other passages have been appealed to, but less convincingly.)³ On closer inspection, do any of these passages clearly establish this teaching? Let’s examine each passage in turn.

A. Acts 2:27

Acts 2:27 is part of Peter’s sermon on the Day of Pentecost, where he is quoting Psalm 16:10. In the *King James Version* the verse reads: “Because thou wilt not *leave my soul in hell*, neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.”

The word translated “hell” is the Greek word *hades*. It is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word *sheol*. Both words simply refer to the “grave” or “the place of the dead.” Therefore, the *New International Version* gives the preferable translation: “Because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay.” This translation is preferable because the context emphasizes that Christ’s body rose from the grave, unlike David’s, which remained in the grave and decayed. Peter is using David’s Psalm to show that Christ’s body did not decay—he is therefore unlike David, who “died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day” (vs. 29).

Therefore, this passage is about Christ’s resurrection from the grave and does not convincingly support the idea the Christ descended into hell.

³ For example, Matthew 12:40, which says that Christ will be three days and three nights “in the heart of the earth,” simply refers to the fact that he was in the grave between his death and resurrection (cf., in the LXX, Psalm 46:2 with Jonah 2:3).

B. *Romans 10:6-7*

These two verses contain rhetorical questions, again Old Testament quotations (from Deuteronomy 30:13): “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’ (that is, to bring Christ down) or ‘Who will descend into the deep?’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).”

This passage hardly teaches that Christ descended into hell. The point of the passage is that Paul is telling people not to ask these questions, because Christ is not far away—he is near—and faith in him is as near as confessing with our mouth and believing in our heart (vs. 9).

Paul uses the word “deep” (*abyssos*) in contrast with the word “heaven.” He wants to give the sense of a place that is unreachable, inaccessible to people. The contrast is not, “Who shall go to find Christ in a place of great blessing (heaven) or a place of great punishment (hell)?” but rather, “Who shall go to find Christ in a place that is inaccessibly high (heaven) or in a place that is inaccessibly low (the deep, or the realm of death)?”

No clear affirmation or denial of a “descent into hell” can be found in this passage.

C. *Ephesians 4:9*

Here Paul writes: “What does ‘he ascended’ mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions?” Those who use this passage to support the idea that Christ descended into hell view “the lower, earthly regions” as equivalent to *hades*. But this is a doubtful interpretation. Paul is arguing that the *ascent* of Christ presupposes a *descent*. And the opposite of the ascension of Christ, in this context, is the incarnation of Christ. That is, in fact, the understanding of the *NIV* Translators.

And so Ephesians 4:9 teaches that Christ first descended to earth, and then he later ascended into heaven.

D. 1 Peter 3:18-20

For many people this is the most puzzling passage on the entire subject. This passage supposedly refers to Christ's descent into *hades* and states his purpose in going there. Peter tells us: "For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water."

Some argue that between his death and resurrection Christ went into hell and preached the gospel, either offering a second chance to those in hell, or simply proclaiming his victory over Satan.

But this interpretation fails to explain the passage adequately. Peter does not say that Christ preached to spirits generally, but only to those "who disobeyed long ago . . . in the days of Noah." Such a limited audience—those who disobeyed during the days of Noah during the building of the ark—would be a strange group for Christ to go to hell and preach to. If Christ proclaimed his triumph, why only to such a select group and not to all in hell?

The most satisfactory explanation of this passage seems to be one proposed (but not really defended) by Augustine long ago. The passage refers not to something Christ did between his death and resurrection, but to what he did through the Spirit at the days of Noah. When Noah was building the ark, Christ, through the Spirit in Noah, preached to the disobedient all around him.

This view gains support from two other statements. In 1 Peter 1:11, Peter says that "the Spirit of Christ" was speaking through the Old Testament prophets. This suggests that Peter could readily have thought that the "Spirit of Christ" was speaking through Noah as well. Then in 2 Peter 2:5, he calls Noah a "*preacher* of righteousness," using the noun (*keryx*) that comes from the same verb

“preached” (*ekeryxen*) in 1 Peter 3:19. So it seems likely that when Christ “preached to the spirits in prison” he did so through Noah in the days before the flood.

This text is also then dubious support for Christ’s descent into hell.

E. 1 Peter 4:6

Here Peter says: “For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead, so that they might be judged according to men in regard to the body, but live according to God in regard to the spirit.” In this passage Peter warns the readers that they should not live the rest of their lives in the flesh to the lusts of men, but to the will of God, even if they should give offense to their former friends and be slandered by them. The “dead” to whom the gospel was preached were evidently not yet dead when it was preached to them, since the purpose of this preaching was in part “that they might be judged according to men in regard to the body.” This could only take place during their lives on earth. This also avoids the interpretation that people have a second chance of repenting after they have died.⁴ So this passage also does not support Christ’s descent into hell.

It seems then that the Bible does not explicitly teach Christ’s descent into hell. The great Reformed theologian Louis Berkhof says quite simply: “Scripture certainly does not teach a literal descent of Christ into hell.”⁵ In fact, it seems that the idea of Christ descending into hell is contrary to other passages of Scripture.

III. Biblical Opposition to “He Descended Into Hell”

Let’s examine now the biblical opposition to **“he descended into hell.”**

⁴ The teaching of a “second chance” for salvation would be contradicted by such passages as Luke 16:19-31 and Hebrews 9:27-28.

⁵ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1949), 342.

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In addition to the fact that there is little if any biblical support for a descent of Christ into hell, there are several texts that argue *against* the possibility of Christ's going into hell after his death.

A. *John 19:30*

The cry of Jesus on the cross, "It is finished" (John 19:30) strongly suggests that Christ's suffering was finished at that moment and so was his alienation from the Father because of his bearing our sin. This implies that he would not descend into hell, but would go at once into the Father's presence.

B. *Luke 23:43*

Second, Jesus' words to the thief on the cross, "Today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43), imply that after Jesus died his soul went immediately into the presence of the Father in heaven, even though his body remained buried in the tomb.

C. *Luke 23:46*

Finally, the cry, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46), also suggests that Christ expected (correctly) the immediate end of his suffering and estrangement, and the welcoming of his spirit into heaven by God the Father (similar to Stephen's cry in Acts 7:59).

These texts indicate, then, that Christ experienced in his death the same things believers today experience when they die: his dead body remained in the earth and was buried (as ours will be), but his spirit passed immediately into the presence of God in heaven (just as ours will).

Then, on the first Easter morning, Christ's spirit was reunited with his body and he was raised from the dead—just as Christians who have died will (when Christ returns) be reunited to their bodies and raised in their perfect resurrection bodies to new life.

This truth has great encouragement for us: we need not fear death, not only because eternal life lies on the other side for the believer in Christ, but also because we know that our Savior himself has gone through exactly the same experience we will go through. He has prepared—even sanctified the way—and we follow him with confidence each step of that way. This is much greater comfort regarding death than could ever be given by any view of a descent into hell.

Conclusion

So, did Christ descend into hell? Obviously, the biblical answer is “No.”

Does the phrase, “**he descended into hell**”, deserve to be retained in the Apostles’ Creed? The single argument in its favor seems to be that fact that it has been around so long. But an old mistake is still a mistake. As long as it has been around there has been confusion and disagreement over its meaning or an attempt to explain it in such a way so as not to destroy the integrity of Scripture.

For my part, there are several compelling reasons against keeping the phrase. First, it has no clear warrant in Scripture. In fact, it seems to be contradicted by several passages of Scripture.

Second, it really is not “apostolic” in the sense that this was the teaching of the Apostles, for it did not appear in any creed until about 359 AD. It was not in the earliest creeds and was only included later because of an apparent misunderstanding about its meaning.

And third, unlike every other phrase in the creed, it does not represent a major doctrine on which all Christians agree, but rather a statement about which most Christians seem to disagree.

The phrase, “**he descended into hell**,” is at best confusing and in most cases misleading for Christians today. My own judgment is that there would be all gain and no loss if it were dropped from the Apostles’ Creed once and for all. Amen.

Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd.

Tampa, FL 33647

Office: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org