

WHAT DO WE MEAN When We Confess *HE DESCENDED INTO HELL?*

I believe in God the Father
Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth;
And in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord:
Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost;
Born of the Virgin Mary;
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 sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Ghost;
The holy catholic Church;
The communion of saints;
The forgiveness of sins;
The resurrection of the body;
And the life everlasting.
AMEN.

When we say that Jesus Christ “descended into hell,” what are we confessing? What do we believe about that?

First, perhaps, it is best to begin by saying what we **do not** mean when we confess Christ’s descent into hell.

We do not mean that after he died, Jesus’ soul went to the realm of Satan, the place of the damned.

After he died, Jesus’ soul immediately went to be with the Father in heaven. We know this because, as our standards teach, the souls of believers who die “immediately return to God” (WCF 32.1) and “immediately pass into glory” (SC 37). Believers’ souls are “received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory” (LC 86). If this is certain for us, how much more so must it be for our Lord Jesus? And we have Jesus’ own testimony. His promise to the believing thief on the cross was, “Truly, I say to you, **today** you will be **with me in Paradise**” (Luke 23:43, emphasis added). And when he died, Jesus cited Psalm 31 when he said, “*Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!*” (Luke 23:46).

No, when we confess that Jesus descended into hell, we do not mean that his soul went to the place of the damned.

We do not mean simply that after Jesus died, he was buried and remained under the power of death until the third day.

Our Larger Catechism says that is what “He descended into hell” expresses. To be sure, we believe and confess that Jesus truly died. His soul went to heaven, as we have seen, and his body was placed in a tomb (that is, he was buried). He remained in this state of death until the third day, when he rose again in glory. And the Creed clearly affirms all these things when it says Jesus “was crucified, dead, and buried...the third day he rose again from the dead.” Why then, would the Creed say these things again, in a much more obscure way?

And while Scripture uses “hell” (that is, words that signify death) to describe the grave and the place of the damned, it is also used to describe “the most extreme distress and anguish.” For example, in Psalm 116:3, the psalmist says, *The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol (that is, hell) laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish.*

No, when we confess that Jesus descended into hell, we do not mean simply that Jesus died, was buried and remained dead till the third day. But this second Scriptural use of “hell” leads us into the proper understanding of what we do mean.

So then, what do we mean when we say, He descended into hell?

***Jesus’ true descent into hell was his suffering
in his truly human body and soul
God’s wrath and punishment for sin.
He endured this so that we will never have to.***

When we confess that Jesus descended into hell, we are confessing the glorious, comforting truth that, in all his sufferings, but especially on the cross, Jesus endured for his people “the most extreme distress and anguish.” The Heidelberg Catechism says it this way:

In my greatest sorrows and temptations, I may be assured and comforted that my Lord Jesus Christ, *by His unspeakable anguish, pain, terror, and agony, which He endured throughout all His sufferings but especially on the cross*, has delivered me from the anguish and torment of hell.

Zacharius Ursinus, the primary author of the Heidelberg Catechism, expands on this in his commentary on the catechism:

Christ descended into hell:

1. That we might not descend to that place, and that he might deliver us from the eternal anguish and torments of hell.
2. That he might carry us with himself to heaven.

Therefore to believe in Christ, who descended into hell, is to believe that he sustained for us, in his own soul, hellish agonies and pains, and that extreme ignominy which awaits the ungodly in hell, that we might never descend to that place, nor be compelled to suffer the pains and torments, which all the devils and reprobate will for ever suffer in hell; but that on the contrary, we might rather ascend with him to heaven, and there with him enjoy the greatest blessedness and glory to all eternity. This is the fruit, and benefit of this article of Christ’s descent into hell.

Jesus descended into hell so that believers will never have to.

You see, it was not enough for Jesus, the perfect sacrifice for sin, simply to die. John Calvin explains it like this:

If Christ had died only a bodily death, it would have been ineffectual. No—it was [necessary] at the same time for him to undergo the severity of God's vengeance, to appease his wrath and satisfy his just judgment.... No wonder, then, if he is said to have descended into hell... for he paid a greater and more excellent price in suffering in his soul the terrible torments of a condemned and [God] forsaken man.

This helps us to understand Jesus' terrible cry at the ninth hour: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* In his cry, Jesus is bearing witness, for our sake, to a deep spiritual distress and extreme anguish that is beyond mere physical suffering, however awful that was.

***Jesus' true descent into hell was his suffering
in his truly human body and soul
God's wrath and punishment for sin.
He endured this so that we will never have to.***

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted... All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. ~Isaiah 53:4,6