



## He descended into hell

Probably no subject of biblical teaching is more difficult to discuss than the *doctrine of hell*. Perhaps no topic of biblical teaching is more controversial than the doctrine of hell. We might say, even though it sounds a bit “snarky,” that the doctrine of hell has fallen out of favor with Christians in recent decades. Even as noteworthy a theologian as Dr. John R. W. Stott has come out against the notion of hell as it has been understood and taught from the Bible by the church historically.

It probably ought to come as no surprise to anyone that the clause in the fourth article of the Apostles’ Creed, “*He descended into hell*,” is perhaps the most debated, objected to, and maligned four words in this honored creed. Many denominations who still use the Apostle’s Creed have removed this clause, relegating it to a footnote — if that.

### **The ultimate humiliation**

In the context of the Apostles’ Creed, the “*descent into hell*” clause expresses the ultimate stage of our Lord’s humiliation. We confess that Jesus was “*conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into hell*.” The Reformers understood this clause as emphasizing that the extent of Christ’s suffering was nothing less than the “*anguish and torment of hell*,” as the Heidelberg Catechism states it (Q&A 44). This torment of hell, the Reformed believe, was the just judgment of God for sin, which all sinners deserve. Rightly understood, this article affirms the awful consequences of unbelief, rebellion against God, and unrepentance. It also affirms that Jesus suffered this torment of hell in our place, for our sake, in order to accomplish our redemption. Put succinctly, this clause of the Creed expresses the Church’s conviction that hell is real (more graphically stated: Hell is in the atlas), and that our Lord’s descent into hell is a significant part of His work of redemption.

Before we explore this teaching of the creed, we need to look at what all the fuss is about over this affirmation of Christ’s descent into hell. Due to the space constraints of this article, only a brief survey of the controversy surrounding the descent clause will be noted.

### **Historically**

First of all, the “*descent into hell*” clause was not originally in the Apostles’ Creed. It was first included around AD 390. Yet many forms of the creed, such as the Roman Symbol, mentioned the burial but not the descent into hell. It finally found a settled place in the creed around the latter part of the seventh century or the early part of the eighth century. The early church theologians were far from unanimous in their views as to what Jesus was supposed to have done in His three day’s state of death. However, what many in the early church understood about Christ’s days in the tomb before His resurrection was that Jesus was in a literal place called the realm of the dead, or the underworld (OT: *sheol*; NT: *hades*) — not a place of eternal punishment (*gehenna*).

Those who object to the inclusion of the descent clause argue that our relatively modern and Reformed understanding of hell is not what the early church understood by the term, as it pertains to Christ’s descent. In any case, due to the controversial nature of the clause, it is argued that it ought to be removed from the creed.

### **Other interpretations**

Secondly, others object to the “*descent into hell*” clause because the Bible does not explicitly say Jesus descended into hell after He died, as the creed states. These objectors point out that those

Scripture passages appealed to by traditional Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Evangelical theologians to defend and teach a literal descent into the realm of the dead have been misinterpreted by them. For example, 1 Peter 3:18–20 is appealed to by both Lutherans and Roman Catholics (as well as some Evangelicals).

*“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water.”*

While this text presents some interesting challenges for exegetes, it clearly holds no basis for an appeal to a descent into a literal realm of the dead. The Roman Catholic tradition calls this realm *Limbus Patrum*, the “place of the Fathers.” This is thought to be that portion of hades which was a sort of “holding room” for Old Testament saints. Jesus descended to this literal location in which the “fathers” were awaiting Christ’s salvation, to apply to those saints His work of salvation and grant them entry into heaven. Lutherans also appeal to 1 Peter 3 as a description of Christ’s going into a literal place of the dead to reveal and finalize his victory over Satan and death’s power. Many Lutheran theologians hold this descent was part of His exaltation. Whatever the case, in this descent, as it is revealed in 1 Peter 3:18 ff., it is argued that Christ preached to the “*spirits now in prison*,” that is, disobedient “spirits,” declaring to them His great victory and pronouncing their sentence of judgment. Objectors argue, correctly in our view, that neither of these views is supported by the text. The text does not refer to a literal descent into hell. The “*spirits now in prison*” are not Old Testament saints at all. They are fallen, disobedient, sinful “spirits,” either angels or men, in the days of Noah. They were preached to by the Spirit of Christ in Noah’s days, probably by Noah himself (see 2 Peter 2:5). Other passages referred to by advocates of a literal descent of Christ to a place of the dead are 1 Peter 4:4-6 and Acts 2:30-31. None of these texts can support the claim of a literal descent into a realm of the dead.

But again, the point of this second group of objectors to the descent clause is that the Bible does not explicitly say Jesus descended into hell. Therefore, such a statement should not find its way into a creed summarizing what ought to be believed by the church about our salvation. It must be admitted that if this objection is true, we should remove the descent clause immediately. However, we will argue that the biblical data does teach Christ’s descent into hell.

One final objection ought to be noted, which is that the exact meaning of the descent clause is not universally acknowledged in the great Reformed confessions. For example, the Westminster Larger Catechism Q&A 50 equates Christ’s descent into hell with His death and burial. In preparation for this article, I ran across a few blogs by Presbyterian ministers who stated their unwillingness to speak of the descent clause in the recitation of the creed in worship. To be fair, however, it must be pointed out that most (I suspect) Presbyterians happily give voice to their belief that Christ descended into hell. Further, it should be acknowledged that many Reformed ministers over the years have called for the removal of this clause, for some of the reasons stated above, and because there is divergence among those who hold to the historic Reformation confessions.

The concern of many of these ministers is that there is not universal agreement testifying to the meaning of this clause among the children of the Reformation; therefore its use does not promote a united testimony of our faith. In addition, they would argue that its inclusion binds the conscience beyond biblical warrant. If, in fact, the descent clause is not sufficiently grounded in the testimony of Scripture, we would agree with this objection.

With these representative objections to the “*descent into hell*” clause in mind, let us now turn to the biblical data regarding our Lord’s descent into hell.

First, we will examine the question as to whether the record of divine revelation provides any warrant for holding that Jesus descended to a literal, local realm of the dead after His death.

## The Biblical record

Appeal for this notion is sometimes made to Acts 2:30-31 and Peter's use of Psalm 16:10 in reference to Jesus not being "*abandoned to hades*." However, the referent, "*hades*," is to be understood along with the next phrase, "*nor did his flesh suffer decay*." These are parallel phrases expressing the same idea. They are a reference to Christ having been in the state and power of death. It was from that state of death and rest in the grave that God raised Him up. There is no reference to our Lord actively at work in the underworld during that time. Thus, we find no support for Jesus descending to a place of the dead in this passage.

Further, when we look at the Gospel accounts of Jesus' suffering on the cross, we see that Jesus completed His redeeming work for sinners on the cross before His death. Note these words of Jesus from the cross: "*It is finished*" (John 19:30); "*Father, into your hands I commit my spirit*" (Luke 23:46); and then Luke added the commentary, "*Having said this, He breathed His last*." These sayings, along with Jesus' words to the thief on the cross, "*Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in paradise*" (Luke 23:43), give clear testimony by Jesus that His earthly work on behalf of His people was completed in His suffering on the cross, His death, and His burial. There is no indication in the Bible that Jesus needed to do anything further for His people after death by going to the realm of the dead. To the contrary, Jesus expressed full assurance that His spirit would be in the hands of His Father upon His death.

Secondly, we need to look at the positive teaching of Scripture about the "*descent into hell*" clause. In the Reformed tradition, this clause is not understood as a final act in a chronological sequence of acts by our Lord. Rather, it is understood as a figurative expression of all that He suffered in His life, in body and soul, and especially on the cross. John Calvin had a formative influence in shaping the Reformed doctrine of Christ's descent into hell, including the way in which this doctrine was formulated in the Heidelberg Catechism. Here is how Calvin expressed the meaning of the sequence of the Creed, "*suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried*":

*The point is that the Creed sets forth what Christ suffered in the sight of men, and then appositely speaks of that invisible and incomprehensible judgment which He underwent in the sight of God in order that we might know not only that Christ's body was given as the price of our redemption, but that He paid a greater and more excellent price in suffering in His soul the terrible torments of a condemned and forsaken man."*

*(Institutes of the Christian Religion 2.16.10)*

Instead of understanding the descent clause as adding another step of Christ's work of humiliation, it expresses the essence of what Christ suffered: the just wrath of God which rested on Him as the bearer of our sin.

The Bible locates our Lord's descent into this terrible suffering under God's wrath especially on the cross. In Matthew 27:45, when Jesus was on the cross, we read: "*Now from the sixth hour to the ninth hour there was darkness over all the land*." We read earlier in Matthew's Gospel of "*outer darkness*" (Matthew 25:30) being a place of judgment. Outer darkness is the place of curse, of the wrath and displeasure of God upon sin. This view is confirmed by Jesus' words in Matthew 27:46: "*And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying ... My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?*" We will never be able to grasp the depth of this anguished cry. But in it our Lord expressed the utter abandonment of His Father's love and presence, and separation from His favor. In short, hell was brought to the cross.

Jesus suffered hell, the just judgment of God for our sin, in order to make satisfaction for our transgressions. All of this was necessary in order that sinners might be redeemed from that same judgment. Without the descent clause, the Church would lose the essential confession of the infinite cost of our redemption.

I believe there is a hell. I believe it because the Bible teaches it. I believe it because the Lord Jesus Christ descended into it. Every human being needs to be confronted with this terrifying truth, unpleasant as it may be. At the same time, the fact that Christ descended into hell, in the place of

and on behalf of sinners, is *good news*. If you receive this truth in faith, it will be a source of unspeakable comfort. The Heidelberg Catechism faithfully summarizes this comfort of Christ's descent into hell in these words:

Heidelberg Catechism Q. 44: *"Why is it added: 'He descended into hell?' That in my greatest temptations I may be assured that Christ my Lord, by His inexpressible anguish, pains, and terrors, which He suffered in His soul on the cross and before, has redeemed me from the anguish and torment of hell."*

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