

## The Descent into Hell—What Does This Mean?

It's a line in the Apostles' Creed that sounds funny to many ears: *He descended into hell*. What does this mean? This confession has been part of the Church for centuries, indeed, 1500 years. It was not part of the original Creed but added around the fourth century. In this article, I will seek to give clarity to this teaching using the biblical record, the Church fathers, and then the Lutheran Confessions, informed by Lutheran orthodoxy. My aim is to give a better understanding for what we are confessing, and why it's relevant today.

### What Is “Hell”? Where Is Jesus Descending Into?

There are two words that get translated (or thought of) as “hell”—*Sheol/Hades* and *Gehenna*.

- ❖ Sheol/Hades—Sheol is the Hebrew term for the realm of the dead, *both the wicked and righteous*. The Greek translation of the OT (Old Testament) renders this as Hades. Sheol is used throughout the OT as synonymous with death itself. Only God can rescue the dead from Sheol. See Psalm 49:15.<sup>1</sup>
- ❖ Gehenna or “The Valley of Hinnom”—this valley was just south of Jerusalem and infamous for the practice of child sacrifice by fire (2 Kings 23:10; Jeremiah 7:31). During the Hellenistic period *Gehenna* was used in connection with this valley, and then metaphorically to denote the final punishment by fire, hence *the place of eternal torment for unbelievers*. See Mark 9:42-48 and Revelation 20:14.

Note that these are *two very different terms*. We are confessing that Jesus, then, descended into the realm of the dead (Sheol/Hades), and not the final place of torment. But what was He doing and why did He do it?

### The Scriptures Supporting Jesus Descent into the Realm of the Dead

While we could point to several OT passages, perhaps the best place to start is with Peter's sermon at Pentecost:

“Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know— this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it. For David says concerning him,

“ I saw the Lord always before me,  
for he is at my right hand that I may not be shaken;  
therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced;  
my flesh also will dwell in hope.

For you will not abandon my soul to Hades,  
or let your Holy One see corruption.

You have made known to me the paths of life;  
you will make me full of gladness with your presence.’

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture citations are from the English Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

“Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, *he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption.* This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses.” (Acts 2:22-31 *emphasis added*)

Here Peter interprets Psalm 16 as applying to the resurrection of Jesus and His ultimate defeat of death. He was “not abandoned to Hades,” that is, not left in the realm of the dead nor experienced the corruption of it. But this begs the question—Jesus was (according to the citation used by Peter) in the realm of the dead *for a time*. Of course, Peter may be speaking figuratively of death itself. But there are other passages that suggest Jesus went to the realm of the dead willingly, even triumphantly, apart from His death.

St. Paul *may* reference Christ’s descent in Ephesians 4:8-10:

Therefore 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? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)

There is a difference of opinion whether “descended into the lower regions” refers to Christ’s incarnation or His descent into Sheol. The general Lutheran position is that this refers to *His incarnation*, though not held by all. I would argue based on the context and linguistic evidence of Paul’s letter, the ascension and then the incarnation are the preferable referents.

But the best Scriptural warrant is 1 Peter 3 and to a lesser extent, 1 Peter 4:

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*, because they formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, *through the resurrection of Jesus Christ*, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him. (1 Pet 3:18-22 *emphasis added*)

With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you; but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. For this is why *the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does.* (1 Pet 4:4-6)

We might say a few things based on the Scriptures cited. First, chronologically Jesus descended into Sheol/Hades after His death and burial and before His resurrection. His

descent, however, *has nothing to do with the work of atonement*. That was done on the cross. It would seem His descent is an event of the proclamation of victory and liberty over death and the devil. Peter also says that Christ was “made alive in the Spirit.” While this precludes some kind of “soul sleep,” it suggests that the whole person (according to both natures) went into the realm of the dead. This is what is known as the “quickenings” of Jesus—that after death, Christ entered into a spiritual and supernatural life, which comprehends the whole person before the resurrection.

It is also of note that Jesus proclaims to those who “formerly did not obey.” Like a town crier announcing important news, Jesus preaches to those in Hades *that He has won a total victory over sin, death, and the devil*. The context of Peter’s reference is a proclamation to those who *in the days of Noah* did not formerly obey. The analogy is made with the suffering now in the Church, that like in the days of Noah, there was also a faithful few, those who believed and waited according to the “patience of God.” This is not a message of salvation given to those who were lost to unbelief but of victory to those who persevered in the faith. For this is Peter’s context—Christ’s road of suffering ends in victory. We are baptized into that victory through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. While the 1 Peter 4 passage might seem to indicate that Christ is preaching a message of salvation to “even ones who are dead” that they “might live in the spirit the way God does,” this would completely contradict the council of God in much clearer passages. The Scriptures teach that once a man dies, then there is a great chasm between him and God that cannot be crossed (see Luke 16:19ff). Instead, we are to read this in the context of Peter’s letter—that Christians are to “live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God.” What is being exhorted is *the importance of the preaching of the Gospel*, not to ones who no longer can hear it, but to those who “might live in the Spirit the way God does.”

### **A Sampling of the Early Church’s Views**

A perusal of the Church fathers is necessary because, as noted, this teaching did make it into the first formal codified Creed that we have (Apostles’ Creed, ca.150). Many of the Fathers did discuss and interpret Christ’s descent. While this is far from all citations, below is a sampling of what the orthodox thinking was:

Irenaeus of Lyons (died c. 200), one of the earlier Fathers, in *Against Heresies* paraphrases 1 Peter 3:19-20:

It was for this reason, too, that the Lord descended into the regions beneath the earth, preaching His advent there also, and [declaring] the remission of sins received by those who believe in Him.

Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 310-386) in his catechetical lectures:

He was truly laid as Man in a tomb of rock; but rocks were rent asunder by terror because of Him. He went down into the regions beneath the earth, that thence also He might redeem the righteous.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430), wrote in *Letter 164 Chapter 2*:

It is established beyond question that the Lord, after He had been put to death in the flesh, “descended into hell;” for it is impossible to gainsay either that utterance of prophecy, “You will not leave my soul in hell,” — an utterance

which Peter himself expounds in the Acts of the Apostles, lest anyone should venture to put upon it another interpretation — or the words of the same apostle, in which he affirms that the Lord “loosed the pains of hell, in which it was not possible for Him to be holden.” Who, therefore, except an infidel, will deny that Christ was in hell?

Please note that in the above citations, the Fathers see the descent as victorious. Cyril apparently sees Christ’s descent as somehow redemptive to the righteous. Also note that Augustine draws on the Acts passage specifically. The above fit with Peter’s “proclaim liberty to the captives,” that is, those who died in the time of Noah and the Great Flood. Like a lot of the teachings over the centuries, this article of faith acquired a lot of “extra” stuff. *Accoutrements* to what we have in Scripture, we might say. During the Middle Ages, Christian art commonly depicted Christ in a soldier’s outfit, with banners and so forth. While this was a reflection of Psalm 91, it was also to point to Christ’s triumphant descent to declare victory over death. This was Luther’s context. |

### **The Confession of the Luther and the Reformers**

During the latter part of the sixteenth century, the Lutheran Reformers, in composing the Formula of Concord (1576-80), decided to add as an appendix to their article on Christology (Article VIII) a brief treatment on Christ’s descent into hell. There had been some confusion on it between reformers, even earlier statements made by Luther. The next generation of Lutherans saw that it was necessary to address the teaching to provide confessional clarity. I provide the short article below:

Because among the teachers of the ancient church as well as among some of us different explanations of the article on Christ’s descent into hell may be found, we remain with the simple explanation of the Christian creed, to which Dr. Luther directs us in his sermon held in 1533<sup>2</sup> at the castle in Torgau on Christ’s descent into hell. Therefore, we confess, “I believe in Jesus Christ, our Lord, God’s Son, who died, was buried, and descended into hell.” In this Creed the burial and Christ’s descent into hell are distinguished as two different articles, and we believe simply that the entire person, God and human being, descended to hell after his burial, conquered the devil, destroyed the power of hell, and took from the devil all his power.

We should “not bother ourselves with lofty, sophisticated ideas about how this occurred,” for this article can be grasped “with reason and the five senses” as little as can the previous article, on how Christ was placed at the right hand of God’s almighty power and majesty. This article can only be believed; we can only hold to the Word. Thus, we retain the heart of this article and derive comfort from it, so that “neither hell nor the devil can capture or harm us” and all who believe in Christ. (*Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article IX—Concerning Christ’s Descent into Hell*)

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<sup>2</sup> This sermon was published in 1533 but preached on Easter Day, 1532.

Even with some disagreement over how this confession should be taught, the Reformers derived their position from a sermon preached by Martin Luther on Easter Day, March 31, 1532. While I won't reproduce it in full, I provide Luther's key points:

- The teaching over the years has gotten way too complicated and speculative.
- We should teach and confess it in a simple, childlike way.
- Christ's descent did not happen *bodily*.
- Christ's descent is the act of Christ conquering the devil and taking all his power from him.
- To be sure, hell still remains and holds unbelievers, as well as death, sin and the devil.
- After His descent, Christ came back and rose from the dead!
- In faith and spirit, hell is completely destroyed and can harm us none.
- Thus, Jesus publicly demonstrated He has total victory over God's enemies.
- We take the greatest comfort in the resurrection, for in it, Christ, has set free those who have died.
- He is the "firstborn of the dead" and leads the way into heaven and life eternal.
- Luther saw this confession as a way to boldly declare that CHRIST IS RISEN.

### **What We (Are) Confess(ing): A Summary and Relevancy for Today**

In summation, we confess this about Christ's descent into hell: It is the first "stage" in His exaltation (the other stages being the resurrection, ascension, session at the right hand of God and eternal reign, and return for judgment). After finishing His work of redemption on the cross, Christ went to proclaim "to the spirits in prison..." It is contrary to Holy Scripture to hold that Jesus descended into hell in order to preach salvation to those who in this life *spurned the call to repentance* (see Luke 16:19-31). The purpose of His descent was to conquer Satan, take all his power, and thus proclaim His victory. Christ came into the world, suffered, and died in order to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:8). This task was accomplished by successfully facing Satan's temptations, casting out demons, suffering and dying on the cross, descending into hell, and rising again to new life. "He descended into hell..." confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord over all things and finally and summarily defeated "the old evil foe."<sup>3</sup>

The Roman Catholic teaching of the "harrowing of hell" adds other elements (such as preaching to the righteous and liberating the souls in Limbo). While there may be some overlap with the Lutheran position, we are confining our confession to *what the Scriptures clearly teach* and how those teachings were rightly confessed. There even might be some difference of opinion between Lutheran theologians whether Christ "set liberty" to those righteous captives in the realm of the dead (the OT saints). With that said, we confess this teaching boldly because Christ is total Victor over every enemy we have. Injecting mystery into Peter's words leads to confusion, especially when we lack correspondence from other passages. Instead, we keep this teaching simple, following Luther, who follows the Scriptures—Christ is risen, and He leads the way for us to everlasting life, even going into the realm of the dead to announce that HE HAS WON.

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<sup>3</sup> Much of this summary is drawn from Franz Pieper's *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. II, pgs. 314-323. Pieper summarizes meaning of the dogmatic positions held by Lutheran Orthodoxy of the past several centuries.