

The Need for Creed, Pt. 5:
He Descended into Hell

Ephesians 4: 9-10; I Peter 3: 18-22; 4: 5-6

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Out at Disneyland in California, there are only a few rides which have been running continuously since 1955. One of them is “Mr. Toad’s Wild Ride.” Visitors sit in little vintage cars and go for a ride with Mr. Toad that begins by crashing through his fireplace. Faster and faster they seem to hurtle, making sharp turns as images flash by all around. Eventually there’s a scary crash with an oncoming train. Then your car passes through a room where the temperature rises and little devils dance around with mocking voices. The wild ride actually passes through a Disney version of hell before taking relieved passengers safely back to the cooler air of Toad’s Hall. It’s not as splashy as a Space Mountain, but Mr. Toad’s Wild Ride lives up to its title.

Well, today we have before us the Mr. Toad’s Wild Ride of Christian theology. This morning we take up the clause in the Apostle’s Creed in which we affirm, “He descended into hell.” This is the runaway winner of Most Difficult Part of the Creed. Modern Christians are baffled by it, and for good reason—there are theological landmines everywhere. It’s very easy to make a mistake.

So let’s look at the Descent first as one more episode in the story of Jesus that the Creed describes. I’d like to do this through a rough drawing that shows this story unfolding from place to place. Of course nobody thinks that heaven is literally “up there,” a place you could fly to in a space ship, and nobody really thinks hell is “down there,” a place you could drill to with the right equipment. We’re talking about spiritual realms. We use “up” and “down” just as a way of speaking.

At the top of the story chart is the symbol for the Trinity. God the Father Almighty reigns with the eternal Son and the blessed Holy Spirit. In the fullness of time, the only begotten Son is conceived by the Holy Spirit. He descends from the throne of heaven to earth. The Son is born as Jesus from the womb of his mother Mary and laid in the manger. He grows up and conducts his ministry of teaching and healing. As we noted last week, these years of Jesus’ ministry are not named in the Creed but they are assumed. Then, of course, Jesus “suffers under Pontius

Pilate.” His conflict with the Powers that Be leads to his sentence of death by crucifixion. His life and ministry run right into the rough beams of the cross. He dies and is buried. So far, so good, right? Well, what happens to Jesus after he dies? Does his story end?

At this point, we’ve got to talk very briefly about what happens to you after you die. The Christian belief has always been that human beings are not just lumps of walking, talking flesh. We have a soul. We are a body/soul unity. At death, the body dies, and the soul is separated from the body. Your body ceases but you are not annihilated. You live, but not the way you had been. That, I hope, sounds fairly normal.

But let’s look back in time a bit further, to the beliefs about what happens after death that were prevalent at Jesus’ time. The Old Testament speaks of Sheol. It was the underworld realm of the dead, where the souls of the dead “linger as shadows of their former selves, cut off from the praises of God.”¹ This was not too different from the underworld described by the Greeks as Hades. Sheol and Hades were not necessarily places of punishment and torture. But Sheol/Hades meant great diminishment. Dead souls did not have a robust life. They were, in a sense, imprisoned in a disembodied, shadow world. Everyone whose body died ended up in this nether realm, this thin, bleak state.

Is that what we mean when we say Jesus descended into hell? Yes, I think we can be confident about at least that much. But explaining it gets tricky. As I heard a speaker say, “If there’s a place in the sermon where I’m going to lose you, this is it. So, since you might get lost, Pay Special Attention!” Here’s the deal. The Apostles’ Creed that we say got translated from Latin. Not the Hebrew of the Old Testament. Not the Greek of the New Testament. But the Latin of the late Roman Empire.

OK, the Latin says Jesus descended *ad inferna*. What does that mean? *Ad inferna* means the place underneath, the realm below, the underworld, the place where the dead are. Jesus went to the realm of the dead. He went where all human beings up to that point had gone—to the holding tank of Sheol, the realm or state of the souls separated from their bodies.

This much is actually easy. Jesus’ body lay in the tomb. His soul went to the place of the dead. Just like everybody else. Jesus experienced death the way everybody else had. The split up of the body/soul unity. He truly died. At the very least, when we say, “He descended into Hell,” we mean that Jesus entered the

realm of the dead. Of course, if that were all it meant, there would be no controversy. He went to the realm of the dead until on third day he rose again as his body and soul were reunited. The resurrected Jesus walked out alive from the tomb in which they had placed his dead body. That's part of the Wild Ride of the Jesus Story we affirm.

But this word *hell* seems to imply something to us more than just floating in the dead tank. It conjures up images of fire, punishment, weeping and gnashing of teeth. Indeed, in the New Testament, there's a word called *gehenna*. Gehenna is the place of burning. It's the state of being separated from God and punished for sin. It's unrelievedly bad. Did Jesus descend to *that* hell? Can we say that?

Now here's the problem. We have this little four letter word in English. H-E, double hockey sticks, as we used to say. For a long, long time, the English word *hell* was used to translate all of these words we've been talking about. When the Scripture said *Sheol* the Hebrew place of the dead, we translated it "hell." When the Scripture said *Hades* the Greek place of the dead, we translated it "hell." When the Scripture said, *Gehenna*, the place of punishment for the damned, we translated it "hell." When the Latin said, *inferna*, the place below, we translated it, "hell." Hmm, translating four different concepts with the same word—this could lead to confusion. And if you're confused right now, well, let's blame it on the ancient translators instead of the pastor!

So let's get to some juicier questions and then consider what they might have to do with us. 1) Is there any sense in which we can affirm that Jesus experienced the hell that is *gehenna*, the everlasting punishment for sin? 2) What did Jesus do when he was in the world below? Did he go there just as a *victim* to suffer further for our sins, or did he go there as a *victor*, to set free those captives? That ought to do us for a morning's work.

First, did the sinless Jesus experience the hell of punishment for sin? The answer from our Presbyterian heritage is Yes, but not necessarily at this point in the story! Our father in the faith, John Calvin, said the hell Jesus experienced came earlier in the story, when Jesus was on the cross.ⁱⁱ

On the cross, Jesus took the sins of the world upon himself. As the prophet said, "But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes, we are healed...the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Is. 53: 5-

6). Jesus was the sin-bearer. He took upon himself what was due to us. Our sins merit everlasting separation from God. Jesus went there.

In 2 Thessalonians, Paul describes “the punishment of eternal destruction” as being, “away from the presence of the Lord and the glory of his might.” Hell is the absence of the presence of God, utter forsakenness. In our jaded minds, we might think that’s no so bad. But let’s realize just what it would mean to be absolutely cut off from God. There would no hope and nothing to hope for. No joy. No delight. No creativity. No bringing forth new life. No forgiveness or further chances. No peace. No love. No expectation of anything to come except further desolation. The only desire is for annihilation which will not come. This is utter dereliction. So Calvin takes us to that point in the Jesus story. No more horrifying words were ever uttered from human lips. The one who from eternity had known the sweet, ecstatic joy of communion with his Father screamed, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.” Here we clap our hands over our mouths in sheer horror. God forsaken by God. In that fearful hour, Jesus underwent the experience of an eternity of hell. He went to the place, to the state, that the sin in each human heart leads. He went to the abandonment, the absolute loneliness that our incessant cries of “*My way, not your way*” demand. He went to the hell we deserve in order that we might not have to. On the cross, Jesus descended into the gehenna hell of separation from his Father.

But follow the story where it goes. Don’t miss this episode. In that moment of God-forsaken hell when he could feel no trace, no hint of his Father’s love, Jesus yet offered himself to the Father. In the Paradise of Eden, Adam could not offer the little faithfulness of not eating the fruit. But at the place of the skull, on the rack of the cross, with no trace of his Father’s presence to be felt, with no expectation of a reply, Jesus prayed, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”

In that instant, human being was re-made. He bent back the human heart to God. Jesus the new Adam replaced the old Adam. He recreated humanity. So Paul says, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation” (@ Cor. 5: 17). The descent into hell on the cross is the redemption of the world.

So that takes us to the second question, “Did Jesus descend to the nether world as victim still suffering or as victor?” In one sense, he still suffered because body and soul were not reunited until Sunday morning. He was not complete while in the realm of the dead. But I don’t believe there was any more punishment for sin occurring. The last words of Jesus from the cross, were “It is finished.” Hell had ended for Jesus before he gave up his spirit and died. Sin was atoned for. The

work was done. He went to the realm of the dead as the Conqueror of sin, death and hell.

Our wild passage from I Peter this morning tells us “being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, Jesus went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they did not formerly obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah” (I Peter 4: 18-19). Jesus preached to the spirits in prison. Now there are a ton of theories about what this means, and all of them hang by very thin threads. We just don’t know all there is to know. This is one of those secret things. But there is one place I’d like to go-to the world of art. Let’s look at the iconic depiction of the Descent into Hell that has been around for many centuries. You might take this literally. Or you might think a literal reading goes beyond the bounds of what Scripture teaches. That’s fine. What I want you to grasp is the Biblical, spiritual meaning at the heart of this icon.

Jesus is victorious. The gates of hell lay shattered under his feet. Christ extends a hand to Adam. He is raising him from his knees, freeing him from his prison. He extends his other hand to Eve. Jesus is leading them forth from death to life. In many icons of this scene, Satan lays bound or crushed under the feet of Jesus as well. He came to the realm of the dead as victor over sin, death and the devil. Now the gospel is proclaimed to the human race. Adam and Eve represent us, all of us. The hand is extended. You may come forth. This is the spiritual truth contained in the phrase, “He descended into hell.” He has come to get us out of prison, and out of the tombs. There is no place he would not go to retrieve us. David prayed, “If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.” Indeed, even when we are hell-bent on running from God and create all manner of hell for us and our loved ones, Jesus goes to the depths with us. He can get us out and bring us home. Even when others seem to open up a can of living hell all over us, when they open the doors of their madness all over our lives, when they empty their evil on us, Jesus is not daunted nor defeated. He has been to hell and he reigns even there.

As we move towards the close, I’d like to return us to a scene I described about 18 months ago. Underneath the present sanctuary of the Basilica of San Clemente in Rome there was discovered an even older church. You can go down into the dimly lit ruins and some of the frescos from the ninth century have been persevered. One is this icon of the Descent into Hell. Remarkably, when I stood in front of it, there was no one else around. I stared at it for a long time. Now time has defaced this fresco and I know you can’t see it very clearly on the screen. But I think you can see Jesus with his hand outstretched and clasping Adam’s hand. What’s harder to see is what’s going on beneath Jesus’ feet. As in so many depictions of the Descent, the devil is on the ground. But in this painting, he still

has hold of Adam's foot. He wants to keep possession of captive humanity. Jesus, however, has his own foot on Satan's back.

As I stood staring at the image, I felt my own life taken up into that painting. I am captive. To sin. To selfishness. To self-destructive behavior. To failure to love. I want to be free. I want to love Jesus and live in the light. But Satan has hold of me. He wants to keep me. I looked and looked. Satan has Adam by the foot. Jesus has his foot on Satan's back. Who will win that struggle? A thrill shot through me. Jesus has won that fight already! I could hear his voice: Get up! Get up! Get up! Rise Adam! Rise Eve. Come out of the prison. Come out of the land of death. Be free! Come into life. The gates are shattered. The evil one is crushed. I'm going back up. Come with me! Let's go.

I know Jesus experienced the hell of God-forsakenness on the cross. I know that the Descent into Hell means Jesus truly entered the realm of the dead. This is a real episode in Jesus-history. And I believe he went there as victor not as victim. The rest of it is shrouded in mystery. I can't say exactly what is literal and what is metaphorical. But I can feel in my bones the truth of this image.

The chains are loosed, the dungeon doors are opened. Get up! He calls. Come into life. No power of hell, no scheme of man can keep us from him if we would answer that call. Here is good news beyond hope: the doors of the prison cells of our sin and futility and hopelessness are not locked! We don't have to stay in them. Jesus has conquered death and hell. You don't have to go there. You don't have to stay there.

The dungeon doors are opened. The prisoners can come out. But get the hard edge of this news: this offer is for a limited time only. These are the days of free choice when you can walk out of sin and into the grace of Jesus. You can walk out of bondage into his arms. Satan may tug at your feet but look with the eyes of faith and see that Jesus has a triumphant foot on his back. The doors are unlocked. But this time will not last forever. As we will discuss in the future, Jesus will return as judge of the living and the dead. If you have sat in the cell of your own will and way thinking "Tomorrow I will change," on that day it will be too late. The locks will turn again, and the end result is not a good one. Don't wait. Get up. Come forth. Walk into his arms and give your life to him. Today put your trust no longer in yourself but in the one who went to hell for you, so you can be free. Let us pray.

Study Questions

- What is the Reformed understanding of what happens to “you” after death?
- Review the Old Testament concept of *Sheol* and how it compares to the Greek concept of *Hades*. How is the concept of *gehenna* different from *Sheol*?
- Recall that the Creed we have in English has been translated from Latin. The Latin Creed uses the word *Inferna*. All four of these words are rendered by the English word “hell!” How might the translation issue create theological confusion?
- In what sense do Presbyterians affirm that Jesus experienced the hell that is *gehenna*, the everlasting punishment for sin?
- What theological truths does the described picture of Jesus raising Adam communicate?
- The prison doors are unlocked—where does that idea apply to the lives of your people?

¹James Kay, “He Descended into Hell,” in *Exploring and Proclaiming the Apostles’ Creed*, ed. Roger Van Harn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 120.

²John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Bk. 2, chp. 16.