

"I Believe in Jesus Christ: He Descended Into Hell"

Sermon Series on the Apostles' Creed - #9

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November 3, 2019

(1 Pt. 3:18-22)

Introduction.

A few years ago, I saw an email that made me laugh. It seems that a man from Illinois left the snow-filled streets of Chicago for a vacation in Florida, and his wife was on a business trip and was planning to meet him there the next day. When he reached his hotel, he decided to send his wife a quick e-mail. But the trouble was he was unable to find the scrap of paper on which he had written her e-mail address, so he did his best to type it in from memory.

Unfortunately, he missed one letter, and his note was directed instead to an elderly pastor's wife, whose husband had just passed away only the day before. When the grieving widow checked her e-mail, she took one look at the monitor, let out a piercing scream, and fell over in a dead faint. At the sound, her family rushed into the room and saw this note on the screen:

Dearest Wife,

Just got checked in. Everything prepared for your arrival tomorrow.

P.S. Sure is hot down here!

Whenever the subject of hell comes up, we tend to joke about it, because we really don't enjoy talking about it, do we? But here we encounter hell right smack dab in the middle of the Apostles' Creed. There's no getting around it. But I think that as we take a closer look at this controversial statement here in the Creed, you'll discover that there is more than meets the eye. And it's actually a cause for great hope and comfort in the Christian faith.

This morning as we study this statement in the Apostles' Creed, there are 3 matters I want you to consider with me: 1) the historical background to the phrase; 2) the possible interpretations of the phrase; and 3) the hopeful promise of the phrase.

I. The Historical Background to the Phrase.

"He descended into hell." This is probably the most neglected phrase in the entire Apostles' Creed. When was the last time you heard a sermon on the subject? The history of this phrase in the Creed is in keeping with the neglect it has suffered, because a study of the history of the Apostles' Creed reveals that the phrase "He descended into hell" was a statement that was added to the Creed only around 390 AD¹. It doesn't appear in the earliest versions of the Apostles' Creed we have on record. And because it was added later by the church, some denominations don't include it now. And others consider it an optional phrase that may be omitted, if desired.

The phrase "He descended into hell" appears to have been added later in the church's confessional life in order to answer the question, "Where was Jesus Christ while His body was in the grave, and what was He doing?" It also tries to take into account and explain four interesting passages which touch on the ministry of Jesus after His death and prior to His resurrection. They are the passage here in 1 Peter, which we've read this morning, as well as another reference in chapter 4; Ephesians 4:8,9, which speaks of Christ descending to the lower, earthly regions; and Psalm 16:9,10, which says "*You will not let Your Holy One see decay.*" Peter quotes Psalm 16 in reference to Christ in his sermon on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2.

While the idea of hell isn't popular in our culture today, we should remember that Jesus actually talked more about hell than He did heaven during His earthly ministry. And the Bible says that it is because Christ experienced hell on our behalf that you and I won't have to. Although this phrase wasn't added to the Creed until the 4th century and many of us don't even like any talk about hell, what this phrase in the Creed says is of great importance. And I believe it can be a cause of tremendous hope.

II. Possible Interpretations of the Phrase.

In my study of the phrase "He descended into hell" I came across five different interpretations which thoughtful scholars have suggested over the years as to what it actually means. *The first interpretation* says that the phrase means that Christ bore the punishment of hell in our place. John Calvin was one who supported this interpretation, and he wrote, "If Christ is said to have descended to the dead, it is nothing to be surprised at, since He bore the death which is inflicted by God on sinners."² Calvin understood the phrase metaphorically as referring to Christ suffering the penalty of our sins, and that He experienced the pain of hell in our place.

A second interpretation suggests that the phrase refers to the preaching ministry of Jesus mentioned in our passage in 1 Peter 3. The suggestion is that the

phrase means that after His death and before His resurrection, Christ went to hell and proclaimed the gospel of salvation to those who had died during the OT era before His coming. Jesus gave those who died before His first Advent an opportunity to put their faith and trust in Him for salvation.

This interpretation has been called the "Second Chance" alternative, and Clement of Alexandria (c. 200 AD), an early church father, was one who held to this idea. And the passage we've read this morning lends itself to this interpretation: "[Christ] 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" (1 Pt. 3:18,19).

The third interpretation is a variation on the second, in that it refers to the preaching ministry of Jesus to the dead, but He preached only to those who in the OT era who looked in faith for His coming – the prophets, patriarchs, and OT believers in Israel. The early church fathers Irenaeus (c. 150 AD) and Tertullian (c. 200 AD) were advocates for this position.

The fourth interpretation is what was known in the Middle Ages as "the harrowing of hell." The idea here is that Jesus Christ didn't so much descend to hell as *invade* it. He came as a conqueror, He defeated death, and He broke the iron bars of hell itself. In this way Jesus rescued the dead in Christ, and they gathered around Jesus as their victorious king. The gates of heaven were opened to the faithful, and in a vivid, dramatic representation of the final triumph of Christ, victory was won.

The final interpretation is that what is meant by the phrase "He descended into hell" is simply that Christ descended to the place of the dead. This interpretation brings to light the fact that the English word "hell" has changed in its meaning since the English form of the Creed was established, and that the word "hell" originally simply meant "the place of the dead." It's suggested that "hell" in this sense corresponds to the Greek word *Hades* or the Hebrew word *Sheol*.

To the Greeks Hades simply meant the place where dead people go, and to the Jews, *Sheol* meant "the land of the dead." The Jews believed that the souls of everyone who died went to *Sheol*. It was a gray, shadowy place, in which people were sort of like ghosts. There was neither light, nor joy, nor color there, and in *Sheol* people were separated from God and each other. (That sounds like hell to me!) Psalm 16:10 says, "He will not abandon my soul to *Sheol*." They viewed *Sheol* as a kind of like Ellis Island – the place you go waiting to be cleared to move on to your final and permanent destination.

Which interpretation is correct? I don't think we should be too dogmatic about any of them, and I think that each of the interpretations actually has some merit of their own. I also believe that God has left us with some degree of doubt in this

matter in order to impress upon us that He did far more for us through the death of Jesus Christ than you and I can begin to realize or than any one interpretation can fully grasp. We need to thank God for His salvation from hell itself, which has been made available to us through the death of Christ.

III. What the Phrase Can Mean for Us.

What can we learn from our study of this phrase in the Creed? There are at least three lessons that come to mind. *First*, this phrase "He descended into hell" reminds us that the creeds are simply summaries of what Christians over the years have understood that Scripture leads us to believe and do. They're not on the same par as the Bible itself, and they don't carry the same authority. There is room for disagreement within the body of Christ on minor matters of the faith, like this, and we shouldn't be too concerned that some traditions include this phrase while others don't.

The Protestant Reformers, and in particular Presbyterians, have always emphasized the truth that our minds and our hearts can only be held captive to the Word of God. Unless a matter is clearly spelled out in the Bible, there is room for disagreement. And that's okay. I like what Richard Baxter, the old English Puritan, once said, "In essentials of the faith unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things charity."

A *second* lesson I think we can learn is that there is a longing in each one of us to know the answer to questions about faith, but in some of these matters the Lord has chosen to reveal these things to us only through a glass darkly, so to speak. There are some matters like this phrase in the Creed that aren't crystal clear. In addition, some passages of Scripture are hard to understand. And I think that this only reinforces that you and I can plumb the depths of our faith as Christians for a lifetime and never completely reach the bottom.

There are some questions about Christian truth to which we will never know the answer until we get to heaven. Like what happens to people who die without ever having heard the Good News of Jesus Christ? Or this phrase in the Creed, which essentially asks, "What happened to the Spirit of Christ while His body lay in the grave till the resurrection?" There are some things about which we can only speculate, and you and I should hold our conclusions loosely and leave the ultimate answers to God.

A *final* lesson I think we can learn is that we can know for certain that whatever hell is, we don't have to go there because Jesus suffered hell for us. He bore our sins on the cross of Calvary, and He endured the separation and punishment of hell itself so that you and I wouldn't have to. The question and answer in the Heidelberg Catechism says it well: "Why is there added: 'He descended into hell?'" That in my severest tribulations I may be assured that Christ

my Lord has redeemed me from hellish anxieties and torment by the unspeakable anguish, pains, and terror which He suffered in His soul both on the cross and before."³

When John Preston, the great Puritan, lay dying, he was asked if he feared death, now that it was so close. He answered and said, "No. I shall change my *place*, but I shall not change my *company*." It was as if he was saying, I shall leave my *friends* on earth, but not my greatest *Friend (Jesus)*, for He who went even to the grave and hell itself for me shall never leave me nor forsake me.⁴ What a great comfort that is in life and in death. Let that be an encouragement to you.

Conclusion.

Of this phrase in the Creed William Barclay has written, "This is the language of hope and devotion. It is the language of vision and poetry. And therein lies the value of this phrase in the Apostles' Creed. It states a fact, but it also opens a vision. The fact the mind can accept, and of the vision the heart may dream."⁵

I close with this. How many of you have seen the Academy Award winning film "Saving Private Ryan"? You'll recall that it tells the story of a squad of American soldiers led by Tom Hanks who are charged with the responsibility of finding and returning to safety a private whose three brothers had already been killed in World War II. The squadron was successful in carrying out the mission. However, all of the men died in the process. Only Private Ryan survived. As Tom Hanks lay dying on a bridge in the arms of the private, he said to the man for whom he and his fellow soldiers had given their lives in the effort to rescue him, "Earn this, soldier. Earn this."

At the end of the film, Private Ryan, now an old man, returns to the beaches of Normandy, and he remembers the sacrifices made for him. He turns to his wife and asks, "Have I been a good man? Have I been a good man?" In other words he was asking, "Have I done enough to deserve what was done for me?"

Whenever we realize that Jesus went to hell and back to rescue us, we may also be tempted to ask, "Have I done enough to deserve this? Have I done enough?" And the honest answer is "No, you haven't. There aren't enough good deeds in the world you can do to earn it." But the good news of the gospel is you don't have to, because Jesus did it all. He went to hell and back for you and me so that we would never have to. Thanks be to God for the amazing love and grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who descended into hell for us. Amen.

¹In the Aquilian form of the Creed. There it appears in the form "He descended into inferna."

²Cited by William Barclay, *The Apostles' Creed*, p. 104.

³Question and Answer #44.

⁴Taken from J.I. Packer, *I Want To Be A Christian*, p. 63.

⁵William Barclay, *The Apostles' Creed*, p. 109.