

08/10/14 -- "What the... 'Jesus descended into Hell': What it means" -- Rev. Seth D. Jones  
Scripture: Psalm 86; 1 Peter 3:13-22; Mark 9:33-37, 42-50

> Apostles' Creed

- "He descended into hell..."
  - History (in Western church)
    - AC first appeared in 180AD or so.
    - Revised and reformulated through a long period of early church history
  - clause first appears in 359AD
    - made official in 750AD
- A fluid document
  - "What are the bare minimums we can believe and still be considered a Christian?"

> Meaning of 'hell'

- Word derives from Norse, Old Dutch, Old English
  - doesn't really enter the lexicon until late 1300s, early 1400s
  - statement of disgust late 1600s
- One word applied to three different words in Scripture in KJV
  - *Sheol*
  - *Hades*
  - *Gehenna*
- When discussing in Scripture, which "hell" do we mean?
  - What kind of 'hell' do we mean?
    - Story about Jeff Harris and coffee table book
      - most common view
        - everlasting torment of fire and darkness
  - *SHEOL*
    - *Judaism does not have a well-established idea of after-life*
      - *Sheol* is something like a world of shadows and shades
        - Shades are reflections of this life, like a shadow
        - no independent existence, a memory stamp on the physical world
        - To be aware of Sheol after death is a state to be feared
          - Most of Jewish history maintains this view
    - Old Testament references throughout
      - Psalm 86
  - *HADES*
    - *Hellenistic Greek - very strong view of the afterlife but very based on Greek mythos*

- Like Sheol, a shade-like existence
- A holding area for souls
- Often what is meant by “the place of the dead” in New Testament
  - 1 Pet 3 -- ??

■ *Ge'henna*

- Valley by Jerusalem that was considered cursed
  - place of child sacrifice by ancient regional religions
- Became the garbage dump for Jerusalem
  - the very poor lived along the edges
    - Think of Rio de Janeiro, Mexico City
- “Where the worm turns...”
  - Huge worms lived in the dump and you could see them move through the garbage
- “The unquenchable fire...”
  - Valley would catch on fire and burn for months and months
    - Think of fires at Rockland dump

■ WHICH ONE?

- Is being referenced in Apostles’ Creed?
- Does the verse referred to mean?
- Do we mean when talking about Hell?

➤ Once we have established which hell, we need to understand what is meant by “JC descending into hell”

○ 6 different ideas

- Jesus suffered *even more* after the Cross
  - some Charismatics say this is actually where Christ’s redemption of humankind occurs
    - Is the Cross enough, or is more somehow needed?
- Jesus gave a 2nd chance to the dead
  - When do we take advantage of God’s grace and love for us?
    - In this life, now, or in the next?
- Jesus pronounced his triumph over death and evil to “the righteous”
  - Adam, Abraham, Isaac, Joseph, David, etc.
    - Is this only the ‘righteous’ in Judeo-Christian tradition or the ‘righteous’ throughout the world?
- Jesus pronounced his victory to Satan and the damned
  - Luther believed this. CS Lewis has a variation of it. Held by many throughout tradition
  - “Binding of the ‘strong man’” Mark 3:27

- If Christ is victorious, what is he victorious over and who needs to hear about it?
  - The phrase is a synonym for Jesus' burial
    - He was buried into the earth, colloquially referred to as “descending into the earth” in many languages, including Aramaic and Greek
    - Calvin and others take this view
    - A condition that he shares with us in his full humanity
      - What is ‘hell’ if not the experience of physical suffering and death?
  - The phrase is a reflection of the spiritual suffering Jesus endured in life and death
    - Jesus experiences distance and separation from God in his full spiritual being, just as so many of us do.
    - Held by Calvin and many modern theologians
      - This view and the above have led to the exclusion of the phrase from many modern expressions of the AC
        - Methodists, some Lutheran versions, various evangelicals
    - Heidelberg Catechism
      - Q & A 44
        - Q. Why does the creed add, “He descended to hell”?
          - A. To assure me during attacks of deepest dread and temptation that Christ my Lord, by suffering unspeakable anguish, pain, and terror of soul, on the cross but also earlier, has delivered me from hellish anguish and torment.
            - [1 Isa. 53](#); [Matt. 26:36-46](#); [27:45-46](#); [Luke 22:44](#); [Heb. 5:7-10](#)
  - What is ‘hell’ if not feeling spiritually separated from God?
    - “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”
- > Should we even say it?
- Yes, we should
    - 1700 years of church history says so.
    - Depending on how you interpret the word ‘hell’, all the above are reasons to keep saying it in the creed.
  - Congregationalist view
    - Would affirm

- Hell as a place of punishment and damnation
- Calvin's position on Apostles' Creed
- Would allow for several different interpretations based on
  - individual conscience
    - assumes the regular engagement with Scripture
  - view of local church
    - assumes Holy Spirit will guard against rank heresy and sectarian behavior

➤ My view

○ Luther

- *I shall not discuss this article in a profound and subtle manner, as to how it was done or what it means to 'descend into hell,' but adhere to the simplest meaning conveyed by these words, as we must represent it to children and uneducated people.* "Therefore whoever would not go wrong or stumble had best adhere to the words and **understand them in a simple way as well as he can**. Accordingly, it is customary to represent Christ in paintings on walls, as He descends, appears before hell, clad in a priestly robe and with a banner in His hand, with which **He beats the devil and puts him to flight, takes hell by storm, and rescues those that are His**. Thus it was also acted the night before Easter as a play for children. And I am well pleased with the fact that it is painted, played, sung and said in this manner for the benefit of simple people. **We, too, should let it go at that, and not trouble ourselves with profound and subtle thoughts as to how it may have happened**, since it surely did not occur bodily inasmuch as He remained in the grave three days.

- (from *Historical Intro to the Lutheran Confessions*, edited by F. Brante. Section 19, par 218.

<http://bookofconcord.org/historical-19.php>)

○ CS Lewis

- *We choose Hell; God does not send people to Hell.*
- *The opportunity to leave is always available if only one would accept the grace and love of God offered through Christ*
  - *The Great Divorce*
  - *The Screwtape Letters*

○ Personal view

- Influenced by early church, Luther, Lewis and Hans Urs von Balthasar
  - Hell exists as separation from God
    - We can be separated in this life and carry it over into our death
  - We separate from God; God does not separate from us

- It is almost impossible to resist God's love and grace
  - Question is '*when will we open ourselves to the experience?*'
- We are to pray for the salvation of all
  - **1 Timothy 2:17**
- We are therefore to act as if it is true all will be saved
- Which leads me to conclude that Hell is either now or will be a very empty place because of Christ's saving work on the Cross

> Questions!