

The Apostles' Creed: Week 7

...He descended into Hell...

In the Scriptures:

1. I will extol you, O Lord, for you have drawn me up,
and did not let my foes rejoice over me.
O Lord my God, I cried to you for help,
and you have healed me.
O Lord, you brought up my soul from Sheol*,
restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit.
Sing praises to the Lord, O you his faithful ones,
and give thanks to his holy name.
For his anger is but for a moment;
his favor is for a lifetime.
Weeping may linger for the night,
but joy comes with the morning.
As for me, I said in my prosperity,
“I shall never be moved.”
By your favor, O Lord,
you had established me as a strong mountain;
you hid your face;
I was dismayed.
To you, O Lord, I cried,
and to the Lord I made supplication:
“What profit is there in my death,
if I go down to the Pit?
Will the dust praise you?
Will it tell of your faithfulness?
Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me!
O Lord, be my helper!”
You have turned my mourning into dancing;
you have taken off my sackcloth
and clothed me with joy,
So that my soul may praise you and not be silent.
O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever.

*The underworld, the land of the dead; literally, “the grave”

(Psalm 30)

...He descended into Hell...

2. Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many.

(Matthew 27:50-53)

3. For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, 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 made subject to him.

Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same intention (for whoever has suffered in the flesh has finished with sin), so as to live for the rest of your earthly life no longer by human desires but by the will of God. You have already spent enough time in doing what the Gentiles like to do, living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry. They are surprised that you no longer join them in the same excesses of dissipation, and so they blaspheme. But they will have to give an accounting to him who stands ready to judge the living and the dead. For this is the reason the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead, so that, though they had been judged in the flesh as everyone is judged, they might live in the spirit as God does.

(1 Peter 3:18-4:6)

As described by Christian writers:

4. It is with no loss or disparagement therefore of His Divine nature that Christ suffers in the flesh, but His Divine nature through the flesh descended into death, that by the infirmity of the flesh He might effect salvation; not that He might be detained by death according to the law of mortality, but that He might by Himself in his resurrection open the gates of death. It is as if a king were to proceed to a prison, and to go in and open the doors, undo the fetters, break in pieces the chains, the bars, and the bolts, and bring forth and set at liberty the prisoners, and restore those who are sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death to light and life. The king, therefore, is

said indeed to have been in prison, but not under the same condition as the prisoners who were detained there. They were in prison to be punished, He to free them from punishment.

– Rufinus, “Commentary on the Apostles' Creed”

5. He also descended into the lower parts of the earth, to behold with His eyes the state of those who were resting from their labours, in reference to whom He did also declare to the disciples: Many prophets and righteous men have desired to see and hear what you see and hear.

For it was not merely for those who believed on Him in the time of Tiberius Cæsar that Christ came, nor did the Father exercise His providence for the men only who are now alive, but for all men altogether, who from the beginning, according to their capacity, in their generation have both feared and loved God, and practised justice and piety towards their neighbours, and have earnestly desired to see Christ, and to hear His voice.

- Irenaeus, “Against Heresies”

6. There is an obscure passage in the First Letter of Peter where the old saint writes that after the crucifixion, Jesus went and preached to "the spirits in prison, who formerly did not obey" (3:19-20), and it's not altogether clear just what spirits he had in mind. Later on, however, he is not obscure at all. "The gospel was preached even to the dead," he says, "that though judged in the flesh like men, they might live in the spirit like God" (4:5-6).

"He descended into hell," is the way the Apostles' Creed puts it, of course. It has an almost blasphemous thud to it, sandwiched there between the muffled drums of "was crucified, dead, and buried" and the trumpet blast of "the third day he rose again from the dead." Christ of all people, in hell of all places! It strains the imagination to picture it, the Light of the World making his way through the terrible dark to save whatever ones he can. Yet in view of what he'd seen of the world during his last few days in the thick of it, maybe the transition wasn't as hard as you might think.

The fancifulness of the picture gives way to what seems, the more you turn it over in your mind, the inevitability of it. Of course that is where he would have gone. Of course that is what he would have done. Christ is always descending and redescending into hell.

"Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden" is spoken to all, whatever they've done or left undone, whichever side of the grave their hell happens to be on.

-Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark*

Why we believe in Christ's Descent into Hell:

- In the Hebrew, Greek, and Roman cosmologies of the time, departed spirits were believed to go to an "underworld" (Sheol or Hades) which was a gloomy place separate from life (although not necessarily involving punishment, since both the righteous and the wicked would go there). But the Christians proclaimed that Christ, having opened Heaven (the presence of God) by his sacrificial death on the Cross, descended to this underworld in order to rescue the dead who were contained therein! Many early Christian writers speak of his Descent. Although they differ in their emphasis (did he come to save the righteous dead, or sinners?) all are agreed that Christ's death itself somehow destroyed or despoiled Death, allowing full salvation to come to those who had died.
- We need to distinguish the doctrine itself from the metaphorical or pictorial language in which it is depicted. In our limited earthly understanding, we have no way to imagine the state of people after death. And if their continued existence is outside of our universe, our earthly categories such as "space" and "time" may not apply. So we need to be cautious in what we assert. But given the rest of the Christian Gospel, we can say the following things for sure: First, since Christ died, whatever happens to dead people should have happened to him too. Second, since Christ is the Resurrection and the Life, his dying would have brought new life to all the dead. The doctrine reminds us that gracious redemption through Christ extends more widely than just the effects which we can see on Earth.