

Descended Into Hell*

1 Peter 3:18-4:6

July 10, 2022

First Presbyterian, Luling

When I was a little girl, we sang from the same red Presbyterian hymnal that you used to use here, with the responsive readings in the back, and on page 12, the Apostles' Creed. I was a constant and voracious reader as a kid, and I often flipped through the hymnal during the sermon. And there, in the Apostles' Creed, was an asterisk. Right after "descended into hell," there was that asterisk. I knew exactly what to do with an asterisk, and my eyes dropped to the bottom of the page, where it said, "Some churches omit this." I was pretty sure I knew why. Hell was one of those words I was not allowed to say, with the exception of this one circumstance: I could say it when we recited the creed each Sunday. I figured that some churches must have more strict rules on cuss words, and that's why they omitted it. So I got a little rebellious thrill each time we said it.

This week's sermon request is: Where in the Bible is "he descended into hell"? Last week we had three answers: Bible, history, and what difference does it make anyway? This week, we're also going to have those answers, but in a different order. We're going to start with history, then look at Scripture, and then talk about what difference it makes.

Of the creeds and confessions that Presbyterians hold as guidance, the Apostles Creed is not the oldest, despite its name. The Nicene Creed is the oldest, and the Apostles' Creed came next. It's called that, by the way, because early church legend had it that each of the 12 apostles had contributed one tenet of the creed¹. That was just a legend, but the name stuck. It started out as a teaching tool that was used as converts were preparing for baptism. They then recited it at their baptisms, as a statement of faith.² As tends to happen when things get passed along by oral tradition, there were different versions in different regions. "Descended into hell" was one of the last phrases added into any official version of the Creed, and a couple of centuries after it first appeared.³

From there, different traditions developed in different directions, too. Generally speaking, this wasn't one of the really hot topics of conversation among theologians in our tradition. It didn't get a lot of print, and didn't develop into one

¹ Jack Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds: A Guide to the Book of Confessions*. WJK Press, 1999. Pg 62.

² Rogers, 61.

³ <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/pt-0320-wpb/>

of our main beliefs, one way or the other. Hence the asterisk. Some churches omit this—tending to indicate either way was acceptable.

The Protestant Reformer John Calvin addresses the phrase. He views hell not as a literal place of punishment but as separation from God. So he dismisses any idea that Jesus went to hell in order to free captives or fight Satan. He wants to retain the phrase in the Creed, though, because he also dismisses that idea that it's just a restatement of "died and was buried."⁴ He's a little hard to pin down but says that Christ suffered visibly on the cross, and invisibly in his descent to hell. It's important to Calvin that Christ suffered anything that a human could suffer.⁵ Later Reformed creeds pretty much follow Calvin. They preserve the idea that Jesus suffered the "humiliation" of descending to the dead, and that experience in turn delivers us from that same torment.⁶

There's some history and theology answers. But the question asked about the Bible. I started with the history, because it's way clearer than the Scriptural evidence for "descended into hell." There's no indication of this idea in any of the crucifixion or resurrection narratives in the Gospels. The most direct references are in the 1 Peter passage we read. You may want to pull the Bible back out for this. Martin Luther, the great reformer, said of this passage: "This is a strange text and certainly a more obscure passage than any other passage in the New Testament. I still do not know for sure what the apostle means."⁷ If Martin Luther can't really figure it out, then I have low expectations for myself. Here we go. Look specifically at chapter 3, verse 19, the second half of it: "he {meaning Jesus} also went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison." And then skip to chapter 4, verse 6: "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."

From this, we can conclude that Jesus had some sort of interaction with the dead, and we can also conclude that this encounter was filled with grace and good news and gospel, rather than judgment and condemnation. I suppose "descended into hell" can carry those meanings, but it's not super clear to me, anyway.

Let's also turn over briefly to Ephesians, 4:8 and 9. It's on page ?? of your pew Bible. We didn't read it earlier. Here it is: "'When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people.' When it says 'He

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.16.8-10

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Westminster Larger Catechism, Question 50. Heidelberg Catechism, Question 44.

⁷ Goppelt, Leonhard, trans. John Alsup. *A Commentary on 1 Peter*. Eerdmans, 1993, p. 255

ascended,' what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth?" This is more clearly a "descended into hell" reference, but it doesn't give any explanation of why it was necessary that Jesus do so. It claims that he couldn't have ascended to heaven if he hadn't descended to hell, but the gospels and Acts indicate that he ascended from earth into heaven, without making mention of the "lower parts."

There are other references that Jesus wasn't held captive to death, or to Hades.

In comparison to last week's question, the Bible answer to this week's is not nearly so clear cut. "Descended into hell" isn't contrary to the Biblical witness, but it's also not clearly or strongly supported, at least according to this preacher.

That all leaves us with the same question as last week: what difference does it make if we say Jesus "descended into hell" or not? The two Psalms we've read this morning begin to have an answer. From Psalm 16, which Etta read: "You do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit." In ancient Hebrew thought, Sheol was the realm of the dead, whether good or evil. It was just the place of the dead. So for the Psalmist, God's faithful ones aren't abandoned there, aren't "given up" to death. Psalm 139, which we used excerpts of for the Call to Worship, begins to imagine all the places a person might go to escape God's presence. The Psalmist there can't come up with a single place, including Sheol, where God would not find him.

Jesus lived on earth, that is, experienced the range of human experience and emotion and limitations. Jesus was crucified, that is, experienced great suffering and death. Jesus was buried, that is, was treated just like any other human after death. And he descended into hell, the most distant place from God that a human can imagine. Even there, Jesus has been. And even there, Jesus was his same self: grace, good news, mercy.

That's what difference it makes. Wherever we are, bodily or spiritually, however distant we think we might be from God, however painful our suffering, however isolated and separated we feel, Jesus has been here. Jesus is right there. Jesus's grace and good news and mercy follow us everywhere. Even into hell itself.

The asterisk has disappeared from the hymnal, and the phrase remains printed and we continue to say it. I think it's worth keeping. We need to be reminded that Jesus is here, wherever here is.