

The Apostle's Creed: I Believe in Jesus Christ He Descended into Hell

1 Corinthians 15:1-4

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III](#)

I'd invite you to turn with me to 1 Corinthians 15. We are continuing a series that we have been pursuing on Sunday mornings on The Apostles' Creed. This morning we looked at the phrases that "we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ who suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried." All belong together in the Creed as part of the complex of affirmations pointing to the same truth in the Apostles' Creed, but tonight, we'll especially look at that last one "He descended into hell." So turn with me in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 15 and we'll read the first four verses.

Now, I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.

Amen. And thus ends this reading of God's holy Word. May He write its eternal truths upon our hearts. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we thank You for Your Word. We pray that You would cause it to be a lamp to our feet, a light to our paths, and that You would grant us understanding both of the summarization of the truth of Your word in the Apostles' Creed and behind it an understanding of Your own inspired Scripture. We ask these things in Jesus' name, Amen.

The phrase that we're going to look at very briefly tonight is without question the most controversial in the Apostles' Creed. I grew up in a Presbyterian Church which was first PCUS like this one, the old Southern Presbyterian Church, and then PCA, like this one, Presbyterian Church in America, and when we recited The Apostles' Creed, Lord's Day after Lord's Day, we did not say this particular clause of the Creed. We didn't even have an asterisk in the bulletin saying that this means something else. We just didn't say it at all. I remember being a little bit shocked the first time I said repeated this phrase in another church as a part of my affirmation of my faith. It sounded weird, it sounded Roman Catholic, and it

sounded different. It just sounded like it shouldn't be there. I have come to appreciate, though, the significance of this particular clause in the Creed. In fact, I'm going to suggest to you tonight that it is orthodox and it is helpful if you understand what is being affirmed. I like the way you do it here. And so despite the conundrum of sorting out its meaning, I want to look at two things with you tonight. First, what the phrase means and second, what its significance is. Let me root that a little bit in historical discussion and then we'll zero in first on the meaning of the phrase "descended into hell."

I. Jesus' death was complete to the point of the separation of His body and Spirit.

Let me tell you what it means first and then we'll work back to how it got there. The phrase means that Jesus' death was complete to the point of the separation of His body and Spirit. The phrase indicates that His Spirit departed to the realm of the dead. That is what's being affirmed when we say, "He descended into hell." As you know, there have been different views of this over the course of Christian history. Even as the Apostles' Creed was coming together in the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries, there were different beliefs about what it meant for Jesus to descend into Hades, or to descend below, or to descend into hell, depending upon which arrangement of words were used. *Hades* or *Sheol*, the collective abode of the dead, divided into Paradise or Abraham's Bosom - the state of God-fearing souls - and *Gehenna*, the state of ungodly souls. And so the final clause in this sequence of "suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified, dead and buried, descended into hell" is a matter of controversy even historically.

As I've already mentioned, some denominations consider it optional or refuse to use it at all or stick an asterisk next to it in their bulletins and explain it at the bottom of the page. There have been different views on what this phrase means. Some have suggested that the phrase "descended into hell" refers to the spiritual agony of the experience of the wrath of God which Jesus endured on the cross. That was Calvin's view. Unfortunately, if you look at the order of the phrases in the Creed "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried. He descended into hell" doesn't seem to fit that kind of interpretation. That may be true. I think it is; but I don't think that is what the phrase in the Creed is affirming. It is certainly true that Jesus experienced the covenant ban, the anathema of God. The wrath of God was poured out on the cross. But that phrase of the Creed is not designed to affirm that particular truth.

Others taught that Jesus 'harrowed hell' in His *descendit ad inferna*, or descent into the lower realms. That is, He went and He released the Old Testament saints from spiritual captivity and brought them into paradise. You can find that particular interpretation as early as the third century in a Syrian creed. And when this particular clause of the Creed began to catch on in the western church in the fourth and fifth centuries, that was one of the most popular beliefs leading many

to believe that's why this clause in the Creed was included.

Some people have suggested that Jesus' descent into hell was a second chance. It was a second-chance opportunity for those who had already died apart from Christ to hear the gospel again from Him. There is absolutely no historical suggestion of that particular view anywhere in the history of the Creed, however. Whatever interpretation one accepts, you have to look closely at a range of biblical passages upon which these various ideas are based, especially 1 Peter 3:18-22. You will note I didn't read that tonight for a couple of reasons, but I'll get to that later. So those are some of the different views on the market. Your head's already spinning.

What can this phrase **not** mean? Well, it clearly can't mean three things. It cannot mean the harrowing of hell, that very popular medieval view that Jesus released the captive souls of Old Testament saints held in prison. For one thing, that's not what 1 Peter 3:18-22 is referring to and that view is based on that particular chapter.

It also does not mean the "word of faith" view. Some of those of you who are very big fans of Christian television, and catch Word of Faith teachers from time to time like Kenneth Hagin and Kenneth Copeland will hear them from time to time saying things like this: "Jesus did not pay for your sins on the cross. He paid for your sins in hell. His work on the cross did not pay for your sins; His going to hell paid for your sins." And they teach that the phrase "descended into hell" literally means that Jesus spent time in physical hell under the torment of the devil in order to die a spiritual death and to pay for our sins which were not paid for on the cross. Now, nobody as far as I can tell, in the history of Christianity has ever believed that except Mr. Hagin and Mr. Copeland and their followers. Secondly, that teaching diminishes the cross which you never find orthodox Christians doing after the canon and you never find a New Testament theologian doing in the canon of Scripture. So it can't mean that.

It also can't mean the second chance view that somehow Jesus is going into the realm of the dead to preach to the people who didn't have a first chance. J.I. Packer says, "Peter's words do not provide the least warrant for that inference." So those are some of the things that it can't mean.

What things does it probably not mean? Well, it probably doesn't mean any kind of a descent into a physical hell. You know, the New Testament word for the physical hell of punishment and fire is *gehenna*. There are other words which are associated as well and it probably doesn't mean that.

Furthermore, it probably doesn't mean the modified Protestant harrowing of hell view that you will find in J.I. Packer and Sinclair Ferguson and even Derek Thomas. Now, I had to get that in while Derek was out of town because we only disagree on three things in all of life and it's no fun to agree all the time. That

view, of course, is that Jesus made *hades* into paradise and perfected Old Testament believers and declared victory over the spiritual powers of evil. As much as I like that view, that's probably not what this clause means.

What does it mean? Well, it means this. Jesus really died; He really died even to the point of experiencing just like us, soul and body separation. We experience in death, the separation of soul and body, of spirit and body. If you'll look at the context of this clause in the Creed, it makes perfect sense. Crucified, dead, buried, descended into hell or descended into *hades*. You see, as we saw this morning, the Creed is driving home the reality of the death of our Lord. He was dead, He was buried. The Creed is emphasizing and confirming the totality and the reality of the Lord's death and it continues to hammer this home by saying "descended into hell." It's hammering home the point that He really died.

You know, in Christian history there have been some people who've said, "Whoever it was that died, it wasn't Jesus." And then there have been others who've said, "Well, someone died but it was an apparition, it wasn't really Jesus." And then others have said, "His spirit was taken to glory before He died." But you see, by saying "crucified, dead, buried, descended into hell," the Creed is saying it wasn't an apparition. He was nailed to a post, He died, He had a real body, a corpse, that was placed in the tomb. He wasn't merely unconscious. He wasn't merely swooning from His hours on the cross. He was truly dead to the point that His spirit left His body and went to the realm of the dead.

The point of the Creed is that Jesus experienced death in every sense of the word. Jesus really died in every aspect of what it means to die including the experience of separation of body and spirit. And you know what? That also just happens to be the view of *The Westminster Larger Catechism*. Do you remember question 50? "Wherein consisted Christ's humiliation after His death?" And the answer, "Christ's humiliation after His death consisted in His being buried, and continuing in the state of the dead, and under the power of death until the third day which hath been otherwise expressed in these words: He descended into hell." So that's what it means.

II. The significance of "descended into hell"

So what? What is the significance of that? Again, that whole complex of Jesus' death assures the forgiveness of sins through the payment of the penalty of sin. Sin's penalty is death and Jesus' forgiveness of sins is assured in His payment of the fullness of that penalty of death. And this whole complex of Jesus' death is grounded in the work of a sympathetic mediator. When we say that Jesus descended into hell, we are affirming that He really died, over against all of those that deny that Jesus experienced the fullness of death.

I mentioned this morning that our Muslim friends do not believe that the prophet

Jesus, as they venerate Him, experienced death. You may be unfamiliar with that, but in the Koran 4:157 reads They said in boast 'We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary the messenger of Allah,' but they killed Him not nor crucified Him but so it was made to appear to them. For those who differ therein are full of doubts with no certain knowledge but only conjecture to follow for of a surety they killed Him not." Now let me just stop right there and say, isn't it interesting that if God's stratagem for the forgiveness of sins is the death of His son, isn't it interesting that there have always been some interested to deny that He really died? And so the significance of this clause, of this set of phrases in the Apostles' Creed, is to drive home the point that Jesus experienced the fullness of death, the totality of what it means to die in order to fully deal with the sting of death.

And because He did fully deal with the sting of death, the Christian's approach to death now has two aspects. For us human death continues to be a manifestation of the curse of sin and we don't need to candy coat the hardnesses of death. We can look death squarely in the eye and acknowledge the hurt, the pain, the anguish that sometimes attends death. And at the same time, because of Christ's death, and because His victory over death, and because He has dealt with the sting of death which is sin, the reality of death is also for the Christian a conquered reality. And so the Christian brings to bear both of those truths, both of those aspects, when he thinks about death.

On the one hand, death continues to be a manifestation of the curse against sin. On the other hand, because of Jesus' death, it becomes a portal into glory. That which had been an unmitigated sorrow and manifestation of the judgment of God, is now transported into the greatest means of grace whereby God translates us into His presence.

"Wherein did Christ's humiliation consist? Christ's humiliation consisted in His being born, and that in a low condition, made under the law undergoing the miseries of this life, the wrath of God, the curse-death of the cross in being buried and continuing under the power of death for a time." (WSC Q.27) That's how our *Shorter Catechism* interprets "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried." All of those things are part of what Jesus has done in order to make it so that your sins have been separated from you as far as the east is from the west, and so that you can face death and see in that old enemy one that is now conquered and one which will be conquered, and one which will be brought to an end because Jesus has conquered death.

Let us pray.

Our Lord and our God, we thank You for Your word, we thank You for the truth of the death of Jesus Christ, and we ask now that You would enable us to face death with the reality of Jesus' victory over it, and experience of it clearly in our hearts, and so to face it in faith and hope, trusting in Your good news. In Jesus' name, Amen.

©2013 First Presbyterian Church.

This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template.

Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine*

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).