

Jesus Descended into Hell

Jesus' humiliation consists of his taking on the form of a man and the work done in that state prior to his resurrection. This includes his conception, his birth, his growing up and living in full and holy obedience, the sufferings of his life, his death, and burial. His body was consigned to the tomb and his human soul to the abode of departed spirits.

In the Apostles' Creed Jesus is said to have "descended into hell." There have been many interpretations of the meaning of this expression. It is not found in the earliest versions. The first known appearance of it is in a 390 AD version which added "*descendit in inferna*". Some early translations of *inferna* used the Greek word *hades* while others rendered it "lower parts". The placement of this phrase varied in the creed until it became fixed in later Roman versions which put it after the mention of Jesus' burial and before his resurrection. Calvin states the obvious when he notes that such an addition must have intended to add some new idea that was perceived as missing in the earlier form (Institutes 2:16:8).

The Latin word *inferna* literally means "lower". It was used of the grave into which a body was lowered, or the realm of the dead which was considered to be the underworld in Greek and Roman religions.

The Greek word *hades* also has a wide range of meanings. It was originally the proper name of the Greek god of the underworld, the ruler over the realm of the dead. Later it came to be used as a name for the underworld itself. The word was also used as a personification for death itself and was often used as a synonym for *thanatos* death.

Both *inferna* and *hades* were used to represent the Old Testament Hebrew word *sheol*. Its primary meaning is of the realm or dimension of those who are dead. It was often viewed in ancient times as an underworld. In 33 places in the King James Version it is translated as "grave." The Hebrew term is in some cases used with figurative meanings. Even when speaking of the "grave" it often is not limited to just the physical place itself, but where we go to think of our departed ones whose souls are not there.

Various interpretations of "he descended in to hell"

1. Jesus descended into the fires of hell.

Summary: After his death and burial Jesus suffered in the fires of hell to further atone for the sins of his people. This view is not promoted by any Christian group of any historical importance.

Problems:

- a) On the cross Jesus said "It is finished" (John 19:30) indicating that the work of atonement was completed. There would be no purpose to additional suffering if the mission assigned to him by the Father was accomplished.
- b) On the cross Jesus commended his soul to the Father. There is no reason to believe that

his soul went anywhere else upon its separation from his body at death.

c) There is no portion of Scripture that implies his suffering beyond the work of the cross.

2. Jesus preached the gospel to the Old Testament saints.

Summary: After his death Jesus entered the realm of departed souls to proclaim his work to the saints who had died before the time of the cross.

The Roman Catholics believe that no one could ever be saved outside of the administration of the Christian sacraments. Therefore the Old Testament believers were kept in an intermediate state called the *limbus patrum* until Jesus could go to them and deliver them into heaven.

Many dispensationalists similarly believe that no one can be saved unless they actively accept Jesus as their Savior by a knowledgeable act of the will. The Old Testament saints are always kept separate in their standing from the New Testament church in this view. Therefore the souls of departed believers before the cross were kept in an intermediate state called "Abraham's Bosom". Jesus preached to them and gave them opportunity to exercise their choice in accepting his offered salvation. He led into heaven those who trusted in his completed atonement.

Problems:

a) Biblical teaching indicates that there is no second opportunity for salvation after a person dies (Hebrews 9:27). The idea that departed souls lacked salvation and received it after death is contrary to this teaching.

b) As in the previous view the soul of Jesus was commended into the hands of the Father at death. There is no reason to believe that it was then diverted to another mission.

c) No text of Scripture supports this view. There are a few texts which are used improperly by those supporting this position. But an examination of the references cited fall short of building a foundation for this view.

1 Peter 3:18-20 Did Jesus go to preach to departed souls after his death?

18 For Christ also died for sins once for all, {the} just for {the} unjust, in order that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit;

19 in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits {now} in prison, 20 who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through {the} water.

Who are the spirits who received this proclamation? According to the context (verse 20) they were those alive in the days of Noah while he made the ark. God was patient with them during that time. The preaching that is said to condemn those souls held in prison occurred during their lives while the ark was being constructed, not after their deaths. They did not respond to the message but remained unbelievers.

Who preached to them? We know that Noah was God's appointed witness. Jesus had come to them in the witness of Noah. Before the time of the incarnation true believers

hoped in the promise of a coming deliverance by God which was assured in Eden and prefigured in the sacrifices. Noah represented God's warning and promise both in his life, in his work of building the ark, and in his words.

This verse can only mean a post-crucifixion ministry of Jesus if we ignore the continuing of the sentence into verse 20.

1 Peter 4:4-6 Did Jesus preach the gospel to the dead after his death?

4 And in {all} this, they are surprised that you do not run with {them} into the same excess of dissipation, and they malign {you};

5 but they shall give account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.

6 For the gospel has for this purpose been preached even to those who are dead, that though they are judged in the flesh as men, they may live in the spirit according to {the will of} God.

The reference to those who are dead in verse 6 has a stated purpose in the two previous verses; that upon hearing it they may turn from their excess of dissipation and live to the glory of God while still alive. Though they are dead at the time of the writing of this epistle, they were obviously alive when they heard the warnings that they should turn and live godly lives. As in the previous chapter of 1 Peter (see above) the period before the incarnation is in view. The gospel has been preached to those who were in the time of Peter dead. But in their life time they were warned and presented with witness that they ought to honor the God who made them. The goal is that even though they may be judged in the flesh (while alive) as men and by men in civil courts, in eternity they live in the spirit according to the ways of God. Only when verse 6 is separated from its context can it be so poorly misapplied. It should also be noted that Jesus is not mentioned at all here as the one who preached to the people in question.

Ephesians 4:9 Does this verse support Jesus' descent into hell after death?

9 (Now this {expression,} "He ascended," what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth?

The purpose of the Apostle Paul in this verse of Ephesians is to show that if Jesus "ascended" he must first have "descended". The second reference is defined by the first.

The expression "lower parts of the earth" may have reference to Psalm 139:15 where David makes reference to his conception in his mother's womb saying, "..When I was made in secret, skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth." This would mean that the descent of Jesus in Ephesians 4:9 was his incarnation in the womb of Mary.

This idea of the incarnation is supported by the comparison with his ascension. If his ascension ended his humiliation it implied a beginning to it, which was his incarnation into this earthly life. Clearly there is no clear reference here to a special mission to hell after the death of Jesus. That would not correspond with the evidence Paul is citing to make his point.

By this coming to earth Jesus led away as his captives the whole band of those captive in sin (see verse 8). This would include primarily those who have oppressed the people of

God and were taken away by the Triumphant Conqueror, Jesus Christ, to their deserved judgment. Verse 8 is a direct quote of Psalm 68:18. In Colossians 2:15 Paul more clearly describes this triumph of Jesus having disarmed those oppressive ones.

Psalm 16:10 Did Jesus fulfill this verse by his descent into hell?

10 For Thou wilt not abandon my soul to Sheol;

Neither wilt Thou allow Thy Holy One to undergo decay.

Peter in Acts 2:30-32 and Paul in Acts 13:34-35 both interpret this verse for us. They do not see it as descriptive of a mission to living souls in hell, but of the death and burial of Jesus which was overcome by resurrection. The use of "soul" in this verse probably refers not to the immaterial part of the person, which could not decay as implied in this synonymous parallelism, but to the whole person. This is not an uncommon use of the term in Scripture.

3. Jesus displayed his triumph over Satan in hell.

Summary: Jesus entered Satan's domain after his death to triumphantly display his victory over the power of the devil and to plunder his kingdom. This is the primary view of the Lutherans.

Problems:

- a) It would be strange to place mention of this display of triumph prior to the first mentioned indication of victory, the resurrection.
- b) There are no texts of Scripture that identify such a personal visit and display of triumph after the death of Christ.

4. Jesus suffered agony on the cross.

summary: The expression is only metaphorical to show the extreme agony of Jesus as he humbled himself in Gethsemane and on the cross. This is the view of Calvin and of Ursinus in the Heidelberg Catechism.

Problems:

- a) Such a metaphorical use of the word "hell" does not seem supported by any other use. It is unsafe to presume a figurative use of a term without sound biblical foundation for such a meaning.
- b) The word order does not support this view. It is placed in the creed after the death and burial of Jesus.

5. Jesus descended into the grave.

Summary: Since the words for "hell" sometimes mean "grave" this may simply have reference to the placing of Jesus into the tomb. This view is held by Charles Hodge and some other reformed writers.

Problems:

- a) Why would such an expression have to be added to the creed if it already mentioned his burial? Such an obscure reference would not be added if a clear statement already existed. It is unlikely that a confusing redundancy would be so universally accepted by

the church in such a broadly used and debated creed.

b) the use of the word "descended" is usually an active verb, not a passive one. We would more likely have seen it say "he was placed into hell" if hell meant the grave. Jesus did not descend into the tomb of his own power.

6. Jesus' soul entered the dimension of the dead.

summary: The separation of body and soul in the person of Jesus at his crucifixion is the basic definition of physical death as presented in Scripture. The creed mentions his burial which explains the disposition of his body, then it mentions his descent into "hell". A reasonable explanation is that this intends to show that his real human soul was truly separated from his body in a real human death. This soul would go to some intermediate state of departed souls prior to the resurrection. The term "hell" in the creed could very well represent that abode. This is the view of A. A. Hodge and this present writer.

Support:

a) The terms used for hell in Latin, Greek and Hebrew have been used in many cases to simply refer to the abode of the departed in a general sense. It is the dimension beyond that of the living which we cannot experience until our souls are separated from our bodies. It is not so much to be thought of as a place, as it is a state or dimension of existence.

b) The righteous are often said to descend into hell at death. Jacob (Genesis 37:35), Hezekiah (Isaiah 38:10), David (Psalm 16:10 in its primary application to himself), Jesus (Acts 2:27, 13:34-35, Psalm 16:10 in its application to Jesus' resurrection).

The account of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31 supports this view. Both men, the righteous Lazarus and the reprobate rich man, are said to have died and gone to hell (hades). The rich man's soul was in torment. Lazarus was comforted by Abraham resting on his bosom.

Conclusion: If we adopt this last interpretation, it fits well with the flow of thought in the creed, it explains why it was added and is consistent with the rest of the Scriptural account. Jesus not only was crucified and rendered dead, not only was his body laid in a tomb but his soul also went to the normal place of departed human spirits, *sheol*. This would have been a fitting response to the ongoing debate about the dual natures of Christ and the reality of his human nature which demanded not only a true body but also a true soul that would have been separate in a real human death with the soul continuing in a conscious state. Jesus' humanity is preserved by this statement.

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