

# He Descended into Hell

**By Malcolm H. Watts**

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So reads the Apostles' Creed, the first form of which appeared in the 4th century. This particular article, however, did not generally appear in the Creed until the 7th century. It does not mean that Christ, after death, literally went to the place where wicked men are punished. Passages quoted in favour of this strange belief, upon examination, lend no support to it at all. For example, Ephesians 4:9, in referring to his descent into 'the lower parts of the earth', merely alludes to the Incarnation, with what is clearly a poetical reference to Mary's womb (See: Ps 139:15); and 1 Peter 3:19 relates to the time just before the Flood, when 'the Spirit of Christ' (1 Pet 1:11), working then, in and through

Noah, 'a preacher of righteousness' (2 Pet 2:5), 'preached' to the disobedient men and women of that man's generation, even to those who are now in hell's dreadful prison.

In the context of the Creed, some understand 'hell' (a word originating from the Anglo Saxon word hellan, to cover, or to hide) simply to mean 'the grave', into which men do actually 'descend'. This is because, in Scripture, the Hebrew and Greek words translated 'hell' (sheol and hades) sometimes mean no more than what is suggested - 'the grave' (Jonah 2:2; Acts 2:27,31).

However, many Reformed theologians understand this as signifying that our Lord, in his terrible sufferings, particularly on the cross, experienced the very

torments and pains of 'hell' (Ps 18:5; 116:3 cf. Mk 14:33,34), which involved dereliction of God (Matt 27:46) and the awful and bitter sense of his wrath (Is 53:4,5). In the words of Thomas Brooks, the Puritan, 'Our Lord Jesus Christ did suffer in his soul for our sins such pain, horror, terror, agony, and consternation as amounted unto cruciatus infernales, and are in Scripture called "the sorrows of hell"' (Works, vol. 5, p.102).

The scriptural doctrine, as I understand it, is as follows:

1. Our Lord, in taking the place of sinners, experienced the torments of hell (Pss 18:5; 86:13; 88:7; 116:3). This means that our sins being imputed to him (Ps 40:12; Is 53:6; 2 Cor 5:21; 1 Pet 2:24), he was condemned for them (Gal 3:13), and, in consequence, divine wrath seized upon him (Is 53:3,4; Rom 8:32; cf. Rom 5:9). Christ therefore suffered hellish sufferings (i.e. he suffered the pains of hell): the punishment of sense (Matt 26:37,38; Lk 22:43,44 cf. Lam 1:12) and the punishment of loss (Matt 27:46; cf Ps 22:1ff).
2. It was not in his divine nature that Christ suffered (that being 'without...passions'- Westminster Confession, Ch 2), but in his human nature, including both his body and his soul (Is 50:6; 53:10; Heb 10:10). As Dr. John Stock observes, 'As abstract God, he was impassable. His divinity could not suffer, for the very idea of misery is invincibly incongruous with the conception of God'. It was therefore as 'the seed of the woman' that he was 'bruised' (Gen 3:15; Gal 4:4,5).
3. His sufferings were throughout his life. These constituted the one complete sacrifice for sins. He was 'obedient unto death' and blood shedding was necessary to complete the sacrifice, inasmuch as 'without the shedding of blood there is no remission' (Phil 2:8; Heb 9:22). Indeed, our redemption is always ascribed to his cross, sufferings, and death, which death, of course, involved the shedding of his blood (Eph 1:7; 1 Pet 1:19; Rev 5:9). It follows - and this, I believe, is vitally important - that we are not redeemed by any supposed humiliation or suffering experienced by our Lord after his death.
4. His sacrifice in death was completed - and was itself complete. 'It is finished' (Jn 19:30). The Greek word is rendered elsewhere 'performed' (Lk 2:39), 'made an end' (Matt 11:1), 'accomplished' (Lk 18:31), and even 'paid' (Matt 17:24). Surely, the making of atonement was then 'finished'.

5. Time (perpetual) and place (local) are 'adjuncts' or 'incidental matters'. As Brooks, the Puritan, says: 'These adjuncts of hell Christ is freed from' (vol. 5, p 104). 'His infinite excellence and glory made his short sufferings to be of infinite worth, and equivalent to our everlasting sufferings' (p 103), and the locality of hell is merely 'the place' of the damned, not damnation itself - and it was our damnation Christ suffered. Although the Apostles' Creed says 'he descended into hell', many Reformed theologians (after Calvin) have understood this to mean 'he suffered the death which God in his wrath had inflicted on the wicked' - Institutes 2:16:10). 'The point is', says Calvin, 'that the Creed sets forth what Christ suffered in the sight of men, and then appositely speaks of that invisible and incomprehensible judgment which he underwent in the sight of God'(ibid). If it is argued that Christ went to hell literally, to suffer further, this will be at variance with the scriptures already quoted and it will mean that, since his body lay in the tomb, he only suffered there in his soul. This is a fearful denial of proper atonement - the whole man, Christ Jesus, suffering in the place of sinful men. (Note: 'the lower parts of the earth' into which Christ 'descended' bear no relevance to this subject, being descriptive of his descent into

Mary's womb. See Eph 4:9; Ps 139:15).

6. It is clear that immediately after death, Christ's soul went to paradise (Lk 23:43), another name for 'heaven' (2 Cor 12:2-4). His soul was, at once, in the care and keeping of his Father (Lk 23:46) - even as later, we believe Stephen's soul was in the keeping of his Saviour, our Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 7:50). Christ's entry into heaven, 'the holy place' (the type of which, in the Temple, was 'the holiest of all'), showed that 'redemption' had already been 'obtained' (Heb 9:11,12). I do not believe Christ's words to the thief were spoken only with reference to his divinity. Turretin rightly observes: 'As Christ and the thief truly suffered, so they were to be carried together also into heaven, that both conditions might be common to both... Thus in the same manner, they might be in heaven as to their souls as they were on the cross together as to their bodies' ('Institutes of Elenctic Theology', vol. 2, p 357).

It is noteworthy that the belief that Christ went down literally to hell is actually Romish in its origin. The Catechism of the Council of Trent says, 'Christ being now dead, his soul descended into hell, and remained there just as long as his body was in the sepulcher' (Art. 5). The Protestant Reformers have from the 16th century consistently denied this.

In conclusion, let me say that the hellish sufferings of Christ, endured on behalf of guilty sinners, renders the Lord so very precious to us, both in life and in death. 'Lovest thou me?...Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee' (Jn 21:17).