

“He Descended into Hell”

BY KEITH L. JOHNSON

In the Apostle's Creed we affirm that Jesus Christ “descended into hell.” Exactly what and where is this hell to which he descended? Why did he have to go there? What did he do when he arrived in hell? And why are his descent and our confession of it central to our faith?

Whenever my church prints the Apostle's Creed in the Sunday worship bulletin, one phrase has an asterisk attached to it: “he descended into hell*....” An explanation is provided at the bottom of the page: “hell refers to the realm of the dead rather than the place of punishment.” I have long found the presence of this asterisk and explanation disheartening. After all, if John Calvin is right that the Apostle's Creed contains “a summary of our faith, full and complete in all details,” then doesn't our need to asterisk the Creed signify that we do not truly understand what we believe?¹ Wouldn't better catechesis be a more fitting solution? On my better days, however, I can hardly blame my church leaders for making the addition, because I know that they are simply trying to address a real point of confusion in my church and others like it. Many sincere Christians recite the Apostle's Creed every week without knowing what it means to confess that Jesus Christ “descended into hell.” What are we affirming when we say this phrase? Exactly what and where is this hell to which Jesus descended? Why did Jesus have to go there? What did Jesus do when he arrived in hell? Whom did he meet? And why are his descent and our confession of it central to our faith?

CHRIST'S DESCENT IN SCRIPTURE

Scripture provides limited resources to directly address these questions. The passage most often cited in relation to Christ's descent is 1 Peter 3:18-22. In the midst of a summary of the saving effects of Christ's death and resurrection, Peter states that Christ "went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey" (vv. 19-20a). This

We have to think through Scripture to trace out what must be true about Christ's descent into hell in light of everything Scripture says about God, Christ, and salvation. As the Church has engaged in this task, three approaches have emerged.

This statement seems vague on its own, but readers often have interpreted it in light of the subsequent claim that "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 4:6). Read together, these verses are taken to mean that Christ proclaimed the gospel to the dead who existed in a distinct realm,

often identified with the Old Testament *Sheol* or Greek *Hades*. The timing of this proclamation is clarified by appeals to Romans 10:6-7 and Ephesians 4:8-10, both of which employ the motif of Christ's ascending and descending. These passages have been thought to imply that Christ descended into the "lower parts of the earth" to reside with "the dead" in the period between his crucifixion and resurrection. This idea is connected to Acts 2:27, which cites Psalm 16 to indicate that God would not abandon his people to Hades or let his "Holy One experience corruption." Viewed as a whole, these passages have led interpreters to posit the following scenario: in the time between his death and resurrection—the time identified with Holy Saturday, the day between Good Friday and Easter Sunday—Christ descended into the realm of the dead in order to preach the gospel to the dead who resided there.

This statement marks the limits of what Scripture might be said to explicitly support when it comes to Christ's descent into hell, and my church's explanation of its asterisk stands in line with this content. The problem, however, is that if we are going to say this much about Christ's descent, then we also must be willing to say a lot more. Doctrines can never just be affirmed; they also have to be put to work. And just as it would do little good to say that God is a Trinity without being able to explain *how* the Father, Son, and Spirit are one God, it does little good to say that Christ descended to the dead without being able to explain why he did so and what this descent actually means for our life of faith. This sort of explanation

requires theological reasoning that goes beyond the letter of Scripture into the realm of faithful speculation. We have to think *through* Scripture by following its trajectory to trace out what must be true about Christ's descent into hell in light of everything else Scripture says about God, Christ, and salvation. As the Church has engaged in this task over the centuries, three primary approaches to the descent have emerged.

CHRIST THE TRIUMPHANT KING

The first approach is the traditional position: Christ descended into hell as a triumphant king to proclaim his victory over sin, death, and the devil to the saints who had died before him. The descent takes place as a glorious display of Christ's power and his status as the one who now holds "the keys of Death and of Hades" (Revelation 1:18). As Irenaeus puts it in the second century, "the Lord descended into the regions beneath the earth to preach his advent and to proclaim remission of sins for all who believe in him."² This act fulfills Christ's earlier promise that "the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live" (John 5:25). It also stands in line with God's prior work in salvation history. Christ does not offer salvation to *all* the dead, as if God's covenant had been revised and now everyone had a second chance at salvation. Rather, Christ proclaims salvation only to the *righteous* dead, including figures like David, Samuel, the prophets, and John the Baptist.³ This means that Christ's descent vindicates rather than revises God's promises, and it takes place as the first movement of his Easter triumph.

The key for assessing this approach is to consider what it implies about the nature of Christ's saving work. Specifically, if Christ enters hell as the triumphant king, then Christ's death on the cross must have been sufficient to free humans from the power of sin and death. For most the church fathers, this indicated that the physicality of Christ's death was the very point of his saving work. Christ came to save human beings, and humans are not merely souls but *embodied* souls. The salvation of an embodied soul must be a physical salvation. For them, this meant that Christ saved us on the cross not primarily by fulfilling the standards of divine justice or accepting the fullness of God's wrath. Rather, he saved us by embracing the physical death that comes as a consequence of our sin (Genesis 2:17). This embrace of death was the entire point of the incarnation: Christ took a physical body upon himself precisely so that he could die in it *as God*. As a result, death's power "fully expended" on him, leading to the "dissolution of death" and the resurrection of the faithful.⁴ This is what Paul is talking about when he says, "Death has been swallowed up in victory" (1 Corinthians 15:54). As the eternal Son of God, Jesus Christ defeated death by dying a human death on the cross, and everything that happens after the cross—including his descent and his resurrection from the dead—works out the implications of this victory for our salvation.

CHRIST THE CRUCIFIED SERVANT

The second approach is held by John Calvin (1509-1564) and much of the Reformed tradition after him, including Karl Barth (1886-1968). Calvin affirms that Jesus Christ “descended into hell,” but he rejects the claim that Christ literally descended to the realm of the dead to preach to the saints. Such an idea, he says, “is nothing but a story” containing “childish” elements with no basis in the biblical narrative.⁵ In reality, Christ could not have descended into hell to proclaim salvation to the righteous dead because there are no righteous dead: “all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, as it is written, ‘There is no one who is righteous, not even one’...for ‘no human being will be justified in his sight’ by deeds prescribed by the law” (Romans 3:9-10, 20). This means, Calvin says, that Peter’s claim that Christ “made a proclamation to the spirits in prison” (1 Peter 3:19) should not be interpreted literally. Rather, it is meant to indicate that the power of Christ’s death “penetrated even to the dead” so as to highlight their already determined destiny: the faithful knew that “the grace which they had only tasted in hope was then manifested to the world,” and the wicked “realized more clearly that they were excluded from all salvation.”⁶

Our confession of Christ’s descent gives us similar clarity, Calvin thinks, because it helps us grasp the true nature of his suffering. While he agrees that Christ’s death on the cross was sufficient for salvation, he insists that this suffering must have been *spiritual* as well as physical because God’s judgment against sin included spiritual as well as physical consequences. “If Christ had died only a bodily death,” Calvin says, “it would have been ineffectual. No—it was expedient at the same time for him to undergo the severity of God’s vengeance, to appease his wrath and satisfy his just judgment.”⁷ Here we see the influence of Calvin’s doctrine of the atonement upon his interpretation of the descent. If the consequences of the Fall include God’s wrath against sin, then this wrath must be satisfied in order for salvation to take place. And if the cross is sufficient for salvation, then the cross must have been the place where this wrath was satisfied. For Calvin, the confession that Christ “descended into hell” points us to this very fact, because it helps us recognize the true nature of Christ’s suffering. In addition to his physical suffering, Christ endured an “invisible and incomprehensible judgment” and paid “a greater and more excellent price in suffering in his soul the terrible moments of a condemned and forsaken man.”⁸ The implication is this: when Christ takes the full weight of sin upon himself, he is taking the penalty of God’s wrath against sin as well. This means, as Barth puts it later, that Christ experienced the horrors of hell on the cross: “We must not deny that Jesus gave Himself up to the depths of hell not only with many others but on their behalf, in their place, in the place of all who believe in Him.”⁹ Christ’s descent still marks his victory over sin and its consequences, but the nature of this victory is seen differently: instead of taking place as a triumph *over* death, Christ’s

victory takes place *in and through* his death. The descent thus signifies the moment on the cross when Christ willingly bears the full burden of human sin and its consequences.

CHRIST THE GODFORSAKEN

The third approach, associated most prominently with Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988), combines elements from each of the previous two views. With the tradition, Balthasar affirms that Christ literally descended into hell in the period between his death and resurrection. Yet, with Calvin and Barth, he holds that the descent indicates the depth of Christ's suffering rather than his triumph. Balthasar's approach is governed by his commitment to the Patristic principle that "only what has been endured by Christ is healed and saved."¹⁰ He takes this principle to mean that Christ must suffer the full consequences of sin and death in order to overcome them, which means that he must endure a spiritual death as well as his physical one. He moves beyond Calvin and Barth on this point, however, by affirming that this suffering happens in hell rather than strictly on the cross. As he sees it, to say that Jesus Christ "descended into hell" is to confess that Christ descended to the place of punishment in order to experience the Godlessness of hell on our behalf. "And so it is really God," Balthasar says, "who assumes what is radically contrary to the divine, what is eternally reprobated by God, in the form of the supreme obedience of the Son towards the Father."¹¹ Christ's suffering in hell marks his second death, one that extends the suffering of the cross into a new dimension. The difference between the first and second death is located in Christ's posture toward it. On the cross, Christ actively embraces the burden of human sin and God's wrath against it; in hell, Christ passively exists in solidarity with the dead by accepting the absolute rejection of God.

Although often criticized on this point, Balthasar himself does not think that his approach means that Christ's death on the cross was inadequate or incomplete, as if an additional saving work had to be done in order to secure humanity's salvation.¹² Rather, he sees Christ's suffering in hell as the necessary continuation and perfection of the suffering that began on the cross. "His being with the dead," he says, "is an existence at the utmost pitch of obedience."¹³ The perfection of Christ's obedience includes the display of Christ's lifeless body. This is what Balthasar thinks Peter's statement about Christ preaching to the spirits in prison indicates. It does not occur as the active proclamation of a triumphant king, but rather, it takes the form of a visible, embodied word as the eternal Son, united to a condemned human corpse, that assumes the fullness of God's curse on our behalf.¹⁴ This visible proclamation marks the point at which the *Sheol* of the Old Testament—the shadowy realm of the dead—becomes the hell of the New Testament. "Hell is a *product* of the Redemption," Balthasar argues, "a product which henceforth must be 'contemplated' in its own 'for itself' by the Redeemer, so as to become, in

its state of sheer reprobation that which exists ‘for him’: that over which, in his Resurrection, he receives the power and the keys.”¹⁵ In other words, Balthasar believes that Christ has power over death and hell precisely because he suffered the fullness of death and hell, but then prevailed over them. As a result, hell is determined and defined by Christ himself, because the possibility of hell becomes a reality through his work.

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CHRIST THE LIVING LORD

How are we to sort through these three approaches to Christ’s descent? One place to start is with their distinct accounts of the consequence of sin and Christ’s actions to overcome it. Those who hold to the traditional approach see sin primarily in terms of the death that results from it, and they believe the cross is sufficient to save us because death’s

power is exhausted on Christ. As a result, they import Christ’s Easter triumph into Holy Saturday and view the descent as the first movement of Christ’s victorious reign. Those who follow Calvin’s approach see sin primarily in terms of God’s wrath against it, and they hold that the cross is sufficient to save us because it is where Christ bears this wrath. Accordingly, they import the events of Holy Saturday into Good Friday and view the cross through the lens of the descent. Balthasar sees sin in terms of both death and wrath, and he thinks we are freed from them because Christ suffered both on the cross *and* in hell. He thus extends Good Friday into Holy Saturday, joining them together as two stages of suffering necessary for the sake of our redemption.

The clear differences among these three approaches mask a common similarity: they each interpret Christ’s descent through the lens of another event. The traditional view sees the descent in light of the resurrection; Calvin interprets it as a gloss on the crucifixion itself; and Balthasar sees it as the extension and perfection of the crucifixion.

But what if we explained the descent differently? Specifically, instead of importing the events of Sunday into Saturday, or Saturday into Friday, or extending Friday into Saturday, what if we interpreted the meaning of Christ’s descent primarily in light of the *living* Jesus Christ himself? The Apostle’s Creed, after all, is a confession of faith, and the primary object of our faith is the God who has come to us in Jesus Christ. He is not in hell but

lives and reigns here and now through his Holy Spirit. And one of the ways he does so is through *us*: "it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). When we confess that Christ "descended into hell," we are not merely making a claim about an event that happened in the past; we are making a claim about the One who lives in and through us in the present. To make this confession is to say that the Christ who dwells in us is the *same* Christ who did not regard the borders of death and hell as barriers blocking him from saving us.

This insight adds a distinct dimension to Christ's statement that the "gates of Hades shall not prevail" against his Church (Matthew 16:18). In one sense, he means that the Church has nothing to fear from any external enemy, even death and hell. As Paul puts it, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ?" (Romans 8:35). Yet might Christ not also mean that death and hell pose no barrier for the Church? That is, because Christ crossed the borders of death, are we not free to do so as well? Doesn't Christ's saving work allow us to follow him wherever he may lead, even if doing so means "becoming like him in his death" (Philippians 3:10)? Is not the Church able to go to any place in this world and face any horror because we know that Christ has been to the "darkest valley" and faced our enemies before us (Psalm 23:4-5)?

Perhaps these ideas can direct us to the work that the confession of Christ's descent actually does for the Church. Our limited information leaves us speculating about what it truly means to say that Christ "descended into hell." For everything that we cannot know about the descent, however, we can say this much with confidence: to confess these creedal words is to declare that we can face outward into the world, toward the sometimes brutal and terrifying edges of human life, without fear. To say this phrase is to declare that we the Church—the people who exist in and with Christ—are free to cross any border, confront any evil, and take upon ourselves any suffering as we seek to obey the commission Christ gave us. We can do so with full confidence that Christ himself, "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith" (Hebrews 12:2), has gone before us into the depths and goes with us still.

Where can I go from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there;

if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

Psalm 139:7-8

In short, to say these words is to declare that we are *free*—free to love our enemies, to face sin in its stark reality, and to embrace the world without fear of the cost.

NOTES

1 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.16.8. All translations by Ford Lewis Battles, edited by John T. McNeill, in Library of Christian Classics, volume 20 (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960).

2 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.27.2, translated by James R. Payton Jr., in *Irenaeus on the Christian Faith: A Condensation of AGAINST HERESIES* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 125.

3 For this point, see Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, 4.11. Aquinas later explained that Jesus did not descend to the hell of the damned because he does not have fellowship with darkness (2 Corinthians 6:14). See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, Q. 52, A. 2.

4 On this point, see the remarks by Athanasius in *On the Incarnation*, §§ 8, 10, translated by John Behr, Popular Patristics Series (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011), 57 and 60.

5 Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.16.9.

6 Ibid.

7 Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 2.16.10.

8 Ibid.

9 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2 (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 1957), 496.

10 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama, Volume III: The Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ*, translated by Graham Harrison (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1978), 238-239.

11 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter*, translated by Aidan Nichols, O.P. (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1990), 51-52.

12 For example, see Alyssa Lyra Pitstick, *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 206.

13 Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, 174.

14 Ibid., 150-151.

15 Ibid., 174; emphasis in the original.



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