



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 "He Descended into Hell"
(Easter, pp. 27-34)

What do you think?

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Christian Reflection

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"He Descended into Hell"

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

Prayer

Scripture Reading: 1 Peter 3:13-4:6

Meditation†

Do not fear death; the Savior's death has brought freedom.

He endured death and thus destroyed it.

He descended into Hell and destroyed it.

Even as Hell tasted his flesh he threw it into chaos.

All this was foretold by Isaiah, who said, "Hell below is moved to meet you at your coming." [Isaiah 14:9]

Hell was in chaos because it was annihilated.

It was in chaos because it was cheated.

It was in chaos because it was done away with.

It was in chaos because it was defeated.

It was in chaos because it was led away captive.

Hell swallowed humanity and discovered divinity.

It swallowed earth and experienced heaven.

It swallowed the visible

and was defeated by the invisible.

O death, where is your sting?

O grave, where is your victory?

John Chrysostom (c. 347-407)

Reflection

The stirring passage above from John Chrysostom's Easter sermon and Ambrose's exultant poetry in the concluding hymn are expansions on the early Christian interpretation of 1 Peter 3:13-4:6. The central idea, Keith Johnson explains, is that "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."

These early pastors were clearly jubilant regarding Christ's descent. But what does it mean for our life of discipleship? To answer this requires "theological reasoning that goes beyond the letter of Scripture into the realm of faithful speculation," Johnson admits. "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." He outlines three primary interpretations of the descent that have emerged over the centuries.

- ▶ On the traditional view of *Christ as triumphant king*, Christ descends to announce his victory over sin, death, and the devil and to proclaim God's salvation to the *righteous* dead, such as David, the prophets, and John the Baptist. This view suggests "Christ saved us on the cross not primarily by fulfilling the standards of divine justice or accepting the fullness of God's wrath," Johnson explains. "Rather, he saved us by embracing the physical death that comes as a consequence of our sin."



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▶ On the view of *Christ as the crucified servant*, held by John Calvin and many Reformed thinkers, Christ's descent is figurative, not literal. It's a way of saying that when Christ died, the dead gained clarity – the faithful knew “the grace which they had only tasted in hope was then manifested to the world” and the wicked knew “they were excluded from all salvation.” It also means Christ suffered not only physically, but *spiritually* as he bore God's vengeance against human sin.

▶ The view of *Christ as the Godforsaken*, associated most with Hans Urs von Balthasar, draws upon the first two: with the tradition it holds Christ literally descended to hell, but with the Reformed view it says this reveals the depth of Christ's woe, not his triumph. “Christ's suffering in hell marks his second death, one that extends the suffering of the cross into a new dimension,” Johnson explains. “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.”

Johnson finds insights in each of these views, but offers a further proposal. “What if we interpreted the meaning of Christ's descent primarily in light of the *living* Jesus Christ himself?” he writes. To confess “he descended into hell” means “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.” And this implies that we, the Church, in and through whom Christ lives, “can face outward into the world, toward the sometimes brutal and terrifying edges of human life, without fear.”

Study Questions

1. How is the doctrine of Christ's descent fashioned from biblical resources? What questions remain unanswered by them?
2. How does each view of Christ's descent understand the consequence of human sin and Christ's actions to overcome it?
3. Keith Johnson thinks each view interprets Christ's descent through the lens of another event – the resurrection or crucifixion. What does he mean? Does his proposal avoid this?
4. How would you summarize the meaning of Christ's descent for the life of discipleship?

Departing Hymn: “Heaven with Rosy Morn Is Glowing” (verses 1 and 3b)

Heaven with rosy morn is glowing,
songs of triumph fill the air,
strains of praise from earth are flowing,
Hell is writhing in despair.

Earth's great king, in glory springing
from the deep sepulchral night,
while loud anthems round are ringing,
leads his saints to life and light.

Praise the Father, earth and heaven,
praise the Son, who rose this day,
to the Spirit praise be given –
three in one, and one in three.

Ambrose of Milan (340-397); translated by John Williams (1845)
Suggested Tunes: STUTTGART or RESTORATION

† John Chrysostom, “Easter Sermon,” en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paschal_Homily.

“He Descended into Hell”

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To review the biblical basis for the confession that Christ “descended into hell.”
2. To weigh three theological interpretations of Christ’s descent.
3. To discuss the implications of Christ’s descent for the life of discipleship.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Easter (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Heaven with Rosy Morn Is Glowing” locate one of the familiar tunes STUTTGART or RESTORATION in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

“Whenever my church prints the Apostle’s Creed in the Sunday worship bulletin,” Keith Johnson reports, “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? 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.’” (*Easter*, p. 27)

In this study, Johnson recounts the biblical basis for this doctrine and explores three primary ways of interpreting its implications for our discipleship.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to guide your reflection on the implications of Christ’s death and resurrection.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 1 Peter 3:13-4:6 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

Perhaps Holy Saturday is the most misunderstood element of the Triduum. In this study, Keith Johnson reviews the three primary theological interpretations of the events between Christ’s death and resurrection. Included within the traditional view is the idea of the harrowing of hell when Christ proclaimed God’s salvation to the righteous dead. For more on this aspect of the traditional view, see Ralph C. Wood’s article

“The Gates of Hell Shall Not Prevail,” *Heaven and Hell*, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics 2 (Waco, TX: The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2002), 31-34.

Study Questions

1. The doctrine of Christ’s descent to proclaim the gospel to the dead in a distinct realm, which is often identified with the Old Testament *Sheol* or Greek *Hades*, is based primarily on a reading of 1 Peter 3:18-22 and 4:6. The timing of the event is based on interpretations of Romans 10:6-17 and Ephesians 4:8-10. It is connected to Acts 2:27, which quotes Psalm 16. Some unanswered questions are: 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?
2. Keith Johnson contrasts the three theological approaches to Christ’s descent in terms of how they understand the consequence of human sin and Christ’s actions to overcome it. He writes, “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’s 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.”
3. In the answer above, we see how Johnson thinks the traditional view interprets the descent as the first stage of Christ’s reign through the resurrection, the Reformed view borrows the language of descent to explain Christ’s suffering on the cross, and Balthasar relates the crucifixion to the descent as stages in Christ’s suffering. Here is a summary:

<i>Christ as Triumphant King</i> (traditional)		Holy Saturday ← Easter
<i>Christ as Crucified Servant</i> (Reformed)	Good Friday ←	Holy Saturday
<i>Christ as Godforsaken</i> (Balthasar)	Good Friday —	Holy Saturday
<i>Christ as Living Lord</i> (Johnson)		Holy Saturday

Johnson searches for meaning within each day of the Triduum by relating their events to the living Christ. “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 writes. “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.” Regarding the descent, “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)?”

4. Invite four small groups to research the meaning of the descent for discipleship in each of the three historic views and Johnson’s own proposal. To what extent can elements from these views be combined?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.