

Last week we studied why it is necessary that we die even though Christ has died for us so that we may live. We also looked at His burial and learned that His burial was necessary to further prove that He was truly dead and took up his life again and emerged from the grave in a new, glorious body, the same with which we will be clothed at the end of time.

Today we will uncover the reasons why we confess that "He descended into hell."

The Westminster Larger Catechism Q 50 states as follows:

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 till the third day and then quotes Psalm 16:10 and Acts 2:24 – 27, 31, with which we are in complete agreement.

What we want to pursue is the meaning and benefit from that descent into hell.

By that confession we are assured in times of personal crisis and temptation that Christ suffered unspeakable anguish, pain and terror of his soul, especially on the cross but also earlier for my deliverance from that anguish and torment.

Isa 53:5 But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed.

Mat 26:38 Then He said to them, "My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me."

Mat 27:46 About the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "ELI, ELI, LAMA SABACHTHANI?" that is, "MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?"

Luk 22:44 And being in agony He was praying very fervently; and His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground.

Heb 5:7 In the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His piety.

To better understand this confession, we will focus on the following two questions: What does this confession mean, and what are the benefits of knowing that Christ descended into hell.

a) What does this confession mean?

We find that Scripture refer to the term 'hell' in three different senses.

1. It is used to refer to the **grave**.

Gen 42:38 "But Jacob said, "My son will not go down there with you; his brother is dead and he is the only one left. If harm comes to him on the journey you are taking, you will bring my gray head down to the grave (Hbr: sheol) in sorrow."

Ps 16:10 "Thou wilt not leave my soul in hell (Hbr: sheol)."

Job 17:16 "Will it go down with me to Sheol? Shall we together go down into the dust?"

2. It is also used to represent the **place of the damned**, as in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus.

Luke 16:23 "In hell (Gr.Hades), where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side."

Deu 32:22 For a fire is kindled in My anger, And burns to the lowest part of Sheol, And consumes the earth with its yield, And sets on fire the foundations of the mountains.

Psa 86:13 For Your lovingkindness toward me is great, And You have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol.

Pro 15:24 The path of life leads upward for the wise That he may keep away from Sheol below.

3. It is also used to signify the most **extreme distress and anguish**.

Gen 37:35 Then all his sons and all his daughters arose to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. And he said,

"Surely I will go down to Sheol in mourning for my son." So his father wept for him.

Ps 116:3 "The sorrows of death compassed me, and the pains of hell (Sheol) got hold upon me"

1 Sam 2:6 "The LORD brings death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave (Sheol) and raises up."

This means that He brings us into the most extreme pains, from which He afterwards again delivers us.

2Sa 22:6 The cords of Sheol surrounded me; The snares of death confronted me.

In this Article the term hell is to be understood that Christ suffered the most extreme distress, anguish, and pain, as illustrated in point three above.

Following are the reasons why it does not refer to 'hell' in the context of points one and two above.

1. It cannot be taken as referring to the grave because we already determined that Christ was buried. One can also not argue that his descent into hell complements his burial because to be buried is already definite and complete. He could therefore not descend into the grave after being buried.
2. It cannot refer to the place of the damned since the Divinity did not descend, because it is omni-present, and is and was everywhere.

Christ's body did not descend into hell, because it rested in the grave three days, according to the type of Jonah; nor did it rise from any other place than the grave.

Christ's soul did not descend into hell,

1. Because there is no evidence in Scripture that it did.
2. Because Christ said on the cross when He died: "*Father into thy hands I commend my spirit*" and to the murderer on the cross He said "*...today you will be with me in*

Paradise" (Luke 23:43, 46). The soul of Christ was in the hands of the Father in Paradise, and not in hell. Christ brought deliverance to the murderer before giving His spirit over to the Father. Such felicity and deliverance cannot be found in hell.

Both Christ and the murderer, who suffered on the cross that day, was that day in Paradise, in that place of eternal salvation and blessedness, free from all these tortures: Christ by His own will, and the murderer by the will of Christ.

Paradise is neither hell, nor is it in hell, the place of torment. Christ's Divinity was with the murderer while His soul and body suffered. The deliverance from the cross came to Christ's soul, since His Divinity needed no deliverance.

If we argue that Christ's soul descended into hell, then it must be asked, to accomplish what? Did He suffer more there regardless of the fact that He declared "*It is finished*"? (John 19:30) No not at all.

Some argue that He descended into hell to liberate the fathers, but this is also not possible,

1. Because He accomplished their liberation by suffering for them on earth.
2. He accomplished their liberation by the power, and efficacy of His Godhead from the very beginning of the world, and not by any local descent of His body or soul into hell.
3. The fathers were not in hell, therefore they could not be liberated from that place. The souls of the just are in the hands of God, neither do they suffer any pain. "*And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.*" (Luke 16:26). Lazarus was carried by angels into Abraham's bosom, and not into Limbus Patrum.

Adult study of Jesus Christ

There are those who believe that the soul of Christ descended into hell after his death, not to suffer, nor to liberate the fathers, but that He might there make an open display of His victory, and strike terror into the minds of the devils. There is no evidence in Scripture of any such activity or need for Christ to do this.

The devils already have a full knowledge of Christ and fear Him accordingly.

Luk 4:33, 34 In the synagogue there was a man possessed by the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice, ³⁴"Let us alone! What business do we have with each other, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are--the Holy One of God!"

If Christ were to descend into hell to strike fear into the minds of the devils, all devils will be destroyed on account of the fear. Such an immediate destruction of all evil is obviously not in God's plan since He could have destroyed them all immediately after the fall, or at any moment thereafter.

1PE 3:18-22 For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, ¹⁹through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison ²⁰who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, ²¹and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also--not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²²who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand--with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

I read all five verses because it puts in perspective our baptism and where Christ has gone, into heaven. Most

importantly, we should take a closer look at the passages about the spirits in prison.

“Through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built.”

It deserves a closer look to gain a clear understanding so that we do not misconstrue what the Bible is talking about here. Scripture opposes the view of the Roman Catholic Church who claims that this is proof that Christ preached to the souls of the dead so that they may repent and be saved after they have died.

This passage does not say that Christ descended into hell to scare the devils. The Bible says the following:

Christ went that is, He was sent by the Father to the Church from the very beginning.

*He was made alive by the Spirit, through whom He went...*that is by His Divinity

to the spirits in prison, that is in hell

Who disobeyed long ago when he previously existed, and they *were disobedient*, namely, before the flood.

He preached to them when they were disobedient, while they were in this condition. They were disobedient in the time of Noah. Therefore, it was then that Christ preached through the fathers, inviting the disobedient to repentance.

In 1 Peter 4:6 we read *“For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead, so that they might be judged according to men in regard to the body, but live according to God in regard to the spirit.”* which is also used to further the same argument, that there is another chance for repentance after death but they lose sight of the fact that those were people who were dead when Peter wrote this passage, but who were living at the time it was preached to them. So, it has no bearing on 1 Peter 3:19.

In the epistle of Paul to the Ephesians in chapter 4:9, we read "*...he also descended to the lower, earthly regions*" This by no means should be construed that Christ descended into hell, since this passage does not oppose one part of the earth to another part thereby suggesting that where Christ went was lower than some other higher part of the earth, but his descent to the lower, earthly regions signifies His humiliation.

This is apparent from the object and scope of the Apostle, because he makes a contrast between the highest glory, and the deepest humiliation of Christ.

Eph 4:9, 10 (Now this expression, "He ascended," what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth? ¹⁰He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens, so that He might fill all things.)

So Christ ascended into the highest parts of heaven, that is, in heaven, which is the highest part of the world.

These passages establish nothing in relation to the descent of the soul of Christ into hell, yet, the view we favor in regard to this confession, has nothing of impiety in it, and has been approved of and held by many of the fathers.

After His death, when He had said it is finished, the soul of Christ rested in the hands of His Father, to whom He had commended it. If he descended into hell to triumph over His enemies, this should signify the commencement of His glorification, which it is not. Christ's glorification would not take its beginning in hell.

We are speaking of the degrees of the humiliation of Christ, of which the lowest and most extreme is his descent into hell.

Great terror and dread were struck in the devils by Christ's death. By this He vanquished the devil, sin, and death, and without doubt the devil saw that he was entirely disarmed, and conquered by the death of Christ.

Adult study of Jesus Christ

So, we must conclude, with the proof of Scripture to that effect, that Christ descended into a hellish torment for our sakes, while he was held over in death, as the Westminster Larger Catechism correctly states.

Next week we will deal with the benefits of knowing that Christ has descended into hell.