



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 6.6.2.1 – The Doctrine of Jesus, Son of God, Messiah (Christology)

Jesus' Descent into Hell

The *Apostles' Creed* lists five phases in Jesus' state of exaltation: three in the past, one in the present, and one in the future. The first of these is Jesus' descent into hell. There is probably no statement in the *Apostles' Creed* that is so misunderstood as this. We shall first of all discuss the Bible passages that deal with Jesus' descent into hell and then point out some of the ways in which it has been misunderstood and taught that are contrary to the plain Word of God.

In his first letter, the apostle Peter declared: **“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the Just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water”** (1 Peter 3:18-20). The only “prison” we know of from Scripture is hell, and so it is clear that after His death and burial, Jesus went to hell. But He went to hell only after He was made alive again; therefore, Jesus' descent into hell was not a phase of His humiliation, but it was the beginning of His exaltation. He was made alive in the tomb – His soul was reunited with His body and He was physically alive. In that new glorious body, Jesus Christ, the God-man, descended to hell.

For what purpose did Jesus descend into hell? Peter says He **“preached to the spirits in prison.”** The Greek word that is translated “preached” does not mean “to preach the Gospel,” but it means He made a proclamation of some kind, as a herald might make some public announcement. We have to determine what is being announced from the context. Whom did Jesus address in hell? Peter says He addressed the spirits of those who were disobedient in the days of Noah, that is, those persons who did not listen to Noah's warnings of the coming destruction and were overwhelmed by the waters of the great flood. Where did the spirits of these unbelievers go? They went to prison; they went to hell. That is there where the exalted Jesus addressed them and told them what had happened. He had suffered and died and had been buried and now He was alive again, victorious over all the forces of Satan and hell and death and sin. He was not giving these spirits a second chance to repent and believe, but He was declaring to them His victory over Satan and all his army. We know that Jesus was not giving these persons a second chance, for God's word says: **“It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment”** (Hebrews 9:27).

The apostle Paul was most likely referring to Jesus' descent into hell when he wrote to the Christians in Colossae: **“And He (God or Christ) has taken it (the handwriting of requirements that was against us) out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it (the cross, or more likely, “in Him”, that is, Christ)¹”** (Colossians 2:14-15). When did Jesus triumph over Satan? The letter to the Hebrews says: **“He Himself likewise shared in the same (flesh and blood), that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage”** (Hebrews 2:14-15). It was through His death that Jesus took away the power of Satan and all his forces. Through His death Jesus **“disarmed principalities and powers,”** that is, the forces of the devil. After His death (and burial) Jesus came to life again in the tomb and then made a public spectacle of them by descending to hell and proclaiming His victory over

¹ The Greek can be translated either “in it”, referring to the cross, or “in Him”, referring to Jesus.

them. Jesus' descent into hell did not involve any suffering on His part. Jesus suffering was finished. But now, having won the victory, Jesus declared His victory in hell. Jesus informed all the spirits in hell that the one who had deceived them had been defeated.

There is one other passage that may refer to Jesus' descent into hell. The apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesian Christians: **"Therefore He says: 'When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men.' (Now this, 'He ascended' – what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.)"** (Ephesians 4:8-10). Jesus' ascension into heaven was a sign that Jesus had triumphed over "captivity," that is, Jesus had taken captive the one who had held all mankind captive, namely, the devil. Jesus' ascension into heaven was preceded by a descent into the lower parts of the earth, which could very well refer to Jesus' descent into hell. Some Bible students, however, consider this descent simply to refer to Jesus' coming down to earth from heaven. The passage does, however, link Jesus' descent with His ascent in victory and triumph.

The above, then, is what we know from Scripture concerning Jesus' descent into hell. It is clear that Jesus' descent into hell was not the last phase of His humiliation but the first phase of His exaltation. It was only after He was made alive again in victory that He descended to hell.

We must distinguish between Jesus' suffering on the cross, which was the equivalent of going to hell and suffering eternal torment because of our sins, and His descent into hell. It has become a predominant teaching among various Protestant churches that Jesus' descent into hell refers to Jesus' suffering hell in our place on the cross. But this simply does not agree with Scripture. The descent into hell does not in any way refer to Jesus' suffering of hell on the cross, because His descent into hell took place *after* His burial and *after* He was made alive again. Jesus did not suffer any torment after He died, because of His words from the cross: **"So when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, 'It is finished!' And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit"** (John 19:30). There was no more suffering of hell after Jesus gave up His spirit. Luke tells us that Jesus said: **"Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit"** (Luke 23:46). This shows that Jesus' spirit did not have to undergo any suffering in hell after that point. His spirit was with the Father in heaven.

It is also contrary to Scripture to teach that Jesus descended to hell to give a second chance to the spirits of the unbelievers. This idea is popular among those who teach that no one is destined to stay in hell forever, but that eventually everyone will be saved. But there would be no urgency in the Bible's constant call for repentance if one has another opportunity after death. We have already quoted Hebrews 9:27: **"It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment."** And what about Jesus' teaching in His story of the rich man and Lazarus? There we hear Abraham say to the rich man in hell: **"Between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us"** (Luke 16:26). God's word is clear that there is no second chances after death. **"Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation"** (2 Corinthians 6:2).

The Roman Catholic Church has explained Jesus' descent into hell in a way that has no basis whatsoever in Scripture. They teach is that there are several places in the hereafter: hell, purgatory, and a limbo for Old Testament believers². In their view, Jesus descended to hell to set free the Old Testament believers. A Roman Catholic instruction book says: "After Jesus died, the soul of Christ descended into a place or state of rest, called limbo, where the souls of the just were waiting for Him. Christ did not go to the hell of the damned, but to the 'hell' of the just. In Holy Scriptures, it was called Abraham's bosom. St. Peter called it a prison. We call it limbo" (*My Catholic Faith*). But according to Scripture, the purpose of Christ's descent into hell was to proclaim His victory and the future judgment to those who were in hell.

² The Roman Catholic Church used to teach (unofficially) a limbo for unbaptized babies, but this doctrine was officially rejected in 2007.

Questions

1. Which passages in Scripture discuss Jesus' descent into hell?
2. How do we know that Jesus did not go to hell to give unbelievers a second chance?
3. What kind of preaching did Jesus do in hell when He went there?
4. Why do we say that Jesus' descent into hell is a phase of His exaltation, rather than a phase of His humiliation?
5. How do Jesus' last words from the cross show that Jesus did not descend into hell to suffer?
6. What strange idea is taught in the Roman Catholic Church about Jesus' descent into hell?
7. What was the purpose of Jesus' descent into hell?