

Did Christ “Descend into Hell?”

Is this Christian myth or worthy doctrine?

Pastor Peter Haas - Substance Church

Like most good Lutheran boys, I grew up memorizing the Apostle’s Creed which states, “*Christ was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. On the third day he rose again...*” Thus, I was rather shocked the first time I heard that this was purely Christian myth. Like most people, I thought, “I’m positive there’s a Bible verse somewhere that says that!” But, like everyone else who feels this way, I couldn’t find one that substantially proved this. After all, it’s such a common myth that we simply assume it’s in there somewhere.

From the middle ages and on, many Catholics commonly assumed that no one in the Old Testament (O.T.) went to heaven. Instead they went to purgatory, or limbo (a place of waiting) until Christ came. Unfortunately, the Bible doesn’t give us a huge amount of verses to know exactly where souls went in the O.T. Obviously we know that Enoch in the Old Testament was “taken by the Lord” (Gen 5:24). We also know that Elijah “went to heaven in a whirlwind” (2 Kings 2). These and a few other implications from David seem to convey the same New Testament sentiment that: “*to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.*”

And perhaps you’re in the same place as me. Usually it’s Catholics, Lutherans, and people from a few other mainline denominational backgrounds that were taught “Christ descended into hell to teach them about his victory.” But what does the Bible really say? Generally, there are two primary texts that people refer to when they discuss this doctrine. The first is 1 Peter 3 and the second is Eph. 4. So let’s begin with Peter’s epistle:

1 Peter 3:18-22 states:

18 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, 19 through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison 20 who 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, 21 and 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, 22 who has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

It is commonly taught that here is clear evidence of Christ “descending in hell.” But does this passage really teach this? Before we begin, let’s review an essential rule for “proper interpretation” of the Bible.

A common hermeneutical maxim is this: “a text cannot mean to us what it did not mean to it’s original hearers.” I.e., what was Peter really trying to communicate to his audience? Was he explicitly trying to advocate Christ “descending into hell;” or, was he simply saying: “the same spirit that spoke through Noah spoke through Christ?”

The first problem that scholars have with this (in terms of being a proof-text in favor of a descent into hell), is that Christ doesn’t preach to just anyone. Rather he only preaches to “those who disobeyed in the days of Noah.” So, why would Christ go all the way to hell to preach to such a specific group? Why didn’t he go to those who disobeyed in the days of Moses, or Ezra,

or David? More specifically, why didn't Christ go to those who "obeyed" as well. After all, that is what the Catholic teaching states anyway: "All went to limbo to wait." So, in essence, Christ should be preaching to all of mankind before the New Testament, shouldn't he?

You see, most scholars believe that such an approach commits an "interpretive sin" called *eisogesis*, which means, "we are reading something into scripture that doesn't really exist". Clearly, the text is saying: the Spirit of God preached to these people through Noah. But it doesn't clearly refer to hell; so, frankly speaking, most scholars feel that Peter is simply drawing a neat baptism analogy out of the story of Noah. God's spirit spoke to them about repentance just as he has spoken to us. Only eight of them were "saved through water." Therefore, this is all the more reason for us to participate in the commitment of baptism – a pledge of good conscience before God.

The other passage commonly used is Eph 4. It says:

³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit— just as you were called to one hope when you were called— ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

⁷ But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. ⁸ This is why it says:

**"When he ascended on high,
he led captives in his train
and gave gifts to men."**

⁹ (What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? ¹⁰ He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) ¹¹ It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, ¹² to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

The language here is a bit more cryptic. Again, it could not "stand alone" as a passage for Christ's "descending into hell." The problem is: there is no "stand alone" verse. For many of us, we simply repeated the Apostle's Creed so many times, we assumed it. And thus, with this assumption, we tried piecing these passages into something they are not.

Keep in mind, Jerusalem was on a mountain. So, when God's people went off to conquest a foreign nation such as the Philistines, they had to "descend the mountain" in order to go to battle. After winning, each soldier would take his share of the plunder. And in victorious fashion, the troops would ascend back into the city bringing gifts for all.

So, many scholars believe, Paul is simply using this analogy to refer to Christ. In other words, Paul is saying this: "I want you all to stay in unity. Because Christ paid a price for his church. He came from heaven to earth (he descended) to do battle and die on the cross. Then, after defeating death, he ascended back into heaven with gifts (he purchased men and women for his purposes). Thus, his plunder (a.k.a., purchased men and women) was given back to the church in the form of Apostles, prophets, pastors, etc...And Paul was one of such people. He was a killer. Yet God redeemed him for himself and gave Paul back to the church. Hence, we return to Eph. 4:1 'Live a life worthy of the calling you have received'".

You see, this verse has nothing to do with Christ going to hell. And I suppose we could try to stretch it to somehow mean this. But, I think, in this case, the simplest explanation is

usually the right one.

Then how did the Apostle's Creed get so confusing? Well, keep in mind, creeds like this were being copied and translated over and over again. There are certain words which can mean both "grave" as well as "hell". So, before 650 A.D. there are almost no copies of the Apostles Creed in which "Christ descended into Hell." Most scholars believed that the Apostles Creed fell prey to a simple mistranslation in the middle ages. Of course, textual criticism wasn't done much at all. And Biblical scrutiny was at an all time low in the middle ages. Mysticism abounded. Thus, there were a good number of common myths that slowly worked their way into Christian consciousness.

Either way, it doesn't really matter to us. After all, there's one thing we know for certain: "Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Rom.10:13). So rather than worrying about the state of Old Testament believers, we have better doctrines to be working out. But, it's fun to explore this stuff isn't it?

If you have any more questions: just email me. There are many books that go far deeper into detail than I do. In the meantime: Keep searching the scriptures! And be blessed!

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