

He Descended Into Hell

“He [Jesus] descended into Hell.” We find that statement in the Apostle’s Creed. It is also found in the Athanasian Creed. We confess our belief in Christ descending into Hell whenever we read or recite those Creeds. But do we really believe it? Do we really believe Jesus descended into Hell? Do we even understand what that statement means? And why is it that, *Christ’s Descent*, or simply *The Descent* we’ll call it, is important to us and to our faith?

Christ’s Descent into Hell is something many Christians, even Lutheran Christians, are confused about these days. Whenever it is discussed, and it is only discussed rarely, there is a lot of speculation and misinterpretation about The Descent. I confess that it is a point I have not been clear on myself at all times. In sermons and Bibles studies I have may have misrepresented the Lutheran teaching on Christ’s Descent. Actually, there is clear, scriptural, creedal, Lutheran doctrinal teaching on Christ’s Descent into Hell and we will proclaim that today because it is important.

The biblical basis for the teaching comes from our second lesson today, 1 Peter 3:18-19. It reads. “... He [Christ] was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which he also he went and made proclamation to the spirits in prison...” The Apostles and early Christians, guided by Christ and the Holy Spirit, knew that this event in the ministry of Christ was important enough to include in the Creeds. No one doubted or questioned its authenticity, meaning, or importance in the first centuries of Christianity.

But by the time of the Reformation in the 16th century there were various interpretations and understandings of Christ’s Descent. These opinions on The Descent differed from the scriptural and apostolic truth. Following Martin Luther’s death there were a number of controversies over what was true Lutheran doctrine. Controversy and conflict in the

church over doctrine is nothing new. People are always twisting things for their own twisted reasons and leading others astray.

Some Lutherans were being influenced by the Roman church's teachings and others were influenced by the Radical Reformers ideas, thoughts from people like Calvin and Zwingli. These issues included differences over the doctrines of Original Sin, Free Will, Predestination, the Lord's Supper, and other issues. Lutherans got together to resolve their differences on the basis of Holy Scripture. They did not "agree to disagree," they did not say "let everyone decide for himself." They went for the gospel truth.

The result was a document called the "Formula of Concord," which was joined with other seminal Lutheran documents to form "The Book of Concord," or, in Latin, *Concordia*, meaning "with one heart." We find harmony in Christ by being of one heart with him, not by having our hearts divided. We often refer to the Concordia as the Lutheran Confessions. The Confessions corrected errors and stated definitively the Lutheran position. The constitutions of the ELCA, the synod, and our congregation say that we accept the Bible as God's inspired Word to us and the Confession, the Concordia, as a faithful, accurate interpretation of scripture. To be a Lutheran pastor, I vowed to faithfully preach and teach the Bible and The Lutheran Confessions. (I'm trying.)

Christ's Descent into Hell was never a big issue in the controversies that led to the writing of the Formula of Concord. Still, there were few Lutheran preachers presenting wrong ideas about the Descent. The framers of the Concordia, Spirit-led, found it worthwhile to address The Descent formally. Part of the reason they addressed it, the reason we address any doctrine at all, is that Christian teaching forms an interdependent whole. If we are wrong or unclear about any point, that can throw the entire system off kilter.

A misunderstanding about the authority of scripture or the two natures of Christ can lead to a misunderstanding about faith and salvation, such that one may lose their faith and salvation. Christian doctrine is not an academic exercise or a game; it's about real people and their real faith and their real lives, both temporal and eternal. You wouldn't build a house on a shaky foundation. You wouldn't want a child in school to miss the fundamentals of reading, writing, and arithmetic. We wouldn't want a Christian to be uninformed or misinformed about the content of their faith. That cannot end well.

So what is Christ's Descent into Hell? Let's begin by saying what it is not. It's not just a fancy, poetic way of saying that Jesus really died. The Apostles' Creed, ever precise and succinct, already covered that. It's not a metaphor or a symbol made up by the Apostles to illustrate some deeper spiritual, philosophic truth. That's a disappointment for people who like to look for analogies in the Bible and try to "read between the lines." The Bible just means what it says.

The Descent does not imply that going to Hell was a further part of Jesus' suffering and humiliation after His death. When Jesus died, His suffering was over. His exaltation began when He said, "It is finished," and commended His spirit into the Father's hands. And Christ's Descent was not to go and free those godly people who lived before he was born or convert noble pagans, like Socrates, to the Christian gospel. There is nothing in scripture to suggest that there is a place for the non-Christian righteous after death. Some theologians have talked a place like that called *Limbo*, but it's not biblical concept. The Bible also does not suggest that there is anything like a second-chance at faith after death. Now is the day of salvation. We do well to not speculate on matters on which the Bible is silent.

So what was/is Christ's Descent into Hell? On the basis of scripture alone, and explicitly not church tradition or human speculation, the 16th century Lutherans confessed, and we

still confess today, that the Descent was a real, actual, historical event in the ministry of Christ with significance for us and our faith. It was a part of God's plan for our salvation. The Descent occurred between Good Friday and Easter morning. Christ, in both His divine and human natures, went to "the very citadel of the devil." There he proclaimed his victory, the triumph of His death and imminent Resurrection. I think of it as "Jesus' victory lap." This shook the very foundations of Hell. Hell knew in no uncertain terms that it had been defeated. Hell was wounded, crushed. This is called *The Harrowing of Hell*.

Christ's Descent to Hell, His Harrowing of Hell, is good news for the Christian believer. It's a word of comfort to us. That is why it is in the Creed. That is why it is in the Bible. Knowing that Jesus is Lord of Heaven and Earth, and even Hell, gives us courage in this life and at the hour of our death.

Hell is real. Sadly, I have heard Lutheran preachers and teachers say there is no Hell. I myself have questioned its existence at times. Now I know better. The scriptures teach without flinching a real, literal Hell. So do the Lutheran Confessions. You can look it up; it's in there. If there was no hell, then what, pray tell, does Jesus save us from? Are God's threats empty? Does the Bible lie? No. The reality of Hell and Christ's Descent to it are foundational to our faith, as the Bible and the Confessions teach. Jesus' Descent to Hell tells us that nothing can separate us from his love. Jesus is Lord of all. And we are saved by His grace, which we receive in faith, from eternal damnation, and saved by Him for eternal, abundant life with Him.

Jesus descended into Hell and He is risen. **He is risen indeed!** Thanks be to God. Amen.