



He Descended into Hell

Death has been called “the new obscenity,” the nasty thing that no polite person nowadays will talk about in public. But death, even when unmentionable, remains inescapable. The one sure fact of life is that one day, with or without warning, quietly or painfully, it is going to stop. How will I, then, cope with death when my turn comes?

CHRISTIAN VICTORY

Christians hold that the Jesus of the Scriptures is alive and that those who know him as Savior, Lord, and Friend find in this knowledge a way through all life’s problems, dying included. For “Christ leads me through no darker rooms / Than he went through before.” Having tasted death himself,

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he can support us while we taste it and carry us through the great change to share the life beyond death into which he himself has passed. Death without Christ is “the king of terrors,” but death with Christ loses the “sting,” the power to hurt, that it otherwise would have.

John Preston, the Puritan, knew this. When he lay dying, they asked him if he feared death, now that it was so close. “No,” whispered Preston; “I shall change my *place*, but I shall not change my *company*.” As if to say: I shall leave my friends, but not my Friend, for he will never leave me.

This is victory—victory over death and the fear it brings. And it is to point the way to this victory that the Creed, before announcing Jesus' resurrection, declares: “he descended into hell.” Though this clause did not establish itself in the Creed until the fourth century and is therefore not used by some churches, what it says is of very great importance, as we can now see.

HADES, NOT GEHENNA

The English is misleading, for “hell” has changed its sense since the English form of the Creed was fixed. Originally “hell” meant the place of the departed as such, corresponding to the Greek *Hades* and the Hebrew *Sheol*. That is what it means here, where the Creed echoes Peter's statement that

Psalm 16:10, “thou wilt not abandon my soul to *Hades*” (so RSV: AV has “hell”), was a prophecy fulfilled when Jesus rose (see Acts 2:27–31). But since the seventeenth century “hell” has been used to signify only the state of final retribution for the godless, for which the New Testament name is *Gehenna*.

What the Creed means, however, is that Jesus entered, not *Gehenna*, but *Hades*—that is, that he really died, and that it was from a genuine death, not a simulated one, that he rose.

Perhaps it should be said (though one shrinks from laboring something so obvious) that “descended” does *not* imply that the way from Palestine to Hades is down into the ground, any more than “rose” implies that Jesus returned to surface level up the equivalent of a mine shaft! The language of descent is used because Hades, being the place of the disembodied, is *lower* in worth and dignity than is life on earth, where body and soul are together and humanity is in that sense whole.

JESUS IN HADES


“Being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit” (1 Peter 3:18), Jesus entered Hades, and Scripture tells us briefly what he did there.

First, by his presence he made Hades into Paradise (a


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place of pleasure) for the penitent thief (cf. Luke 23:43), and presumably for all others who died trusting him during his earthly ministry, just as he does now for the faithful departed (see Philippians 1:21–23; 2 Corinthians 5:6–8).

Second, he perfected the spirits of Old Testament believers (Hebrews 12:23; cf. 11:40), bringing them out of the gloom that Sheol, “the pit,” had hitherto been for them (cf. Psalm 88:3–6, 10–12), into this same Paradise experience. This is the core of truth in Medieval fantasies of the “harrowing of hell.”



*Now we can face death knowing that when it comes
we shall not find ourselves alone.
He has been there before us,
and he will see us through.*



Third, 1 Peter 3:19 tells us that he “proclaimed” (presumably, about his kingdom and appointment as the world’s judge) to the imprisoned “spirits” who had rebelled in antediluvian times (presumably the fallen angels of 2 Peter 2:4ff., who are also “the sons of God” of Genesis 6:1–4). Some have based on this one text a hope that all humans who did not hear the gospel in this life, or who having heard it rejected it, will have it savingly preached to them in the life to come, but Peter’s words do not provide the least warrant for that inference.

What makes Jesus' entry into Hades important for us is not, however, any of this, but simply the fact that now we can face death knowing that when it comes we shall not find ourselves alone. He has been there before us, and he will see us through.

FURTHER BIBLE STUDY

The Christian's attitude toward death:

- Philippians 1:19–26
- 2 Corinthians 5:1–10
- 2 Timothy 4:6–18

QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT AND DISCUSSION

- Define and differentiate the biblical terms *Hades*, *Sheol*, *Gehenna*.
- How do we know that Christ's experience of death was genuine? What is the importance of this fact?
- What difference does it make whether we face death with Christ or without him?