

Christ Descended Into Hell: A Sermon Study on 1 Peter 3:18–20

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[This is the eighth in a series of sermon studies on the 12 articles of the Formula of Concord. The Synod's Formula of Concord Anniversary Committee proposed the series to the homiletics department of the Seminary as a part of its planned observance of the anniversaries of the Formula of Concord and of the Book of Concord.]

The doctrine of Christ's descent into hell is a doctrine that most Christians know little about, even though they confess it regularly in the Apostles' Creed. It is also a doctrine which is often neglected when preaching schedules are drawn up. The preacher who preaches on the doctrine in Article IX of the Formula of Concord is almost sure to be offering his hearers something that will be new to many of them.

The background of the article on the descent into hell, shortest of all the articles of the Formula, is briefly this. John Aepinus, a student of Luther's and later pastor and superintendent at Hamburg, began to teach that Christ's descent into hell was part of His state of humiliation. According to Aepinus, "hell is a place prepared by divine justice to punish the devils and wicked men." Accordingly, Christ descended in order to suffer the pangs required to satisfy the wrath of God, in order to present a *satisfactio plenaria* to God. Viewed in this way, Christ's descent was the last stage of His great passion. His triumph, then, began with His resurrection. Aepinus called Christ's descent into hell "the last degree of His humiliation," "the extreme part of His obedience and satisfaction."

Article IX of the Formula speaks out, however, not only against the error of Aepinus. Medieval theologians frequently taught that Christ entered the abode of the dead with His soul only. In his *Commentary*, John Calvin says that in Christ's descent "the manifestation of Christ's grace was made to godly spirits, and they were thus endued with the vital power of the Spirit." The Reformed Church generally construes the descent as a figurative expression for the sufferings of Christ, especially of His soul, on the cross, as part of the penalty He paid for sin.

Against these errors the Formula speaks very clearly, if briefly. The three short paragraphs (35 lines) of the Epitome emphasize: "We know that Christ descended into hell, destroyed hell for all believers, and delivered them from the power of death and of the devil, from eternal condemnation and the jaws of hell" (FC, Epit. IX,4).

As to the "how" of Christ's descent, the Thorough Declaration states briefly: "We simply believe that the entire person, God and man, after the burial descended into hell, conquered the devil, destroyed the power of hell, and took from the devil all his might."

The *sedes* for the doctrine of Christ's descent into hell is 1 Peter 3:18–20. Although Peter's first epistle is addressed to Christians under trials, suffering is not the keynote; triumph is. As evidence that suffering is not something intrinsically bad, the apostle points to Christ. Through suffering He entered into a new kind of life.

The Text: 1 Peter 3:18–20

Verse 18: "For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit."

"Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust"—although *ἔπαθεν* has considerable textual support, it is less well attested than *ἀπέθανεν*. NIV, NASB, and AAT all translate "Christ died."

Christ died unjustly, because He was *δίκαιος*. But His suffering and death were not, let it be said, forced on Jesus against His will. Recall His words, "I lay down My life...No man taketh it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself" (Jn 10:17f). And just because Christ's obedience was willing, the Father was pleased with it and accepted it as satisfaction for the accumulated guilt of a world of sinners.

περὶ ἁμαρτιῶν makes clear that Christ's death was an atonement, an expiation for sin. The aorist plus ἄπαξ implies that the expiation was effected (Hb 9:26). The descent into hell was therefore not an expiatory act. ὑπὲρ ἀδίκων implies that Christ's work was vicarious.

"...that he might bring us to God"—Christ's avowed purpose was to bring the human race back into friendship and fellowship with God, back into the Father's family. That mission was successfully accomplished in the perfect life and the innocent death of Christ.

"...being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit"—unceremonious return to dust did not follow Christ's death, but vivification and glory did. Christ's spirit and body, which had been separated in death, were reunited. Although His body still hung on the cross in the waning afternoon hours of that Friday we call Good, His spirit had been given into His Father's hands.

God accepted Christ's sacrifice, and in token of His approval restored His Son to life. Normally sacrificial victims on Jewish altars remained dead. The distinction is to be observed between God's vivifying Jesus and raising Him from the dead; vivification and resurrection are not identical. The latter term is regularly used so as to include both Christ's dead body's coming to life and its appearance to chosen witnesses. Here Peter speaks of what occurred before Jesus appeared to His disciples on Easter Sunday.

Some New Testament scholars feel that the last word of verse 18 should be spelled with a small "s," that the μέν...δέ construction indicates a simple contrast between σαρκὶ and πνεύματι, the two states of our Lord's human nature. The argument is persuasive (thus "put to death flesh-wise, and then made alive spirit-wise").

Verse 19: "...by which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison;"

The antecedent of the relative pronoun "which" is, of course, πνεύματι, and one's exegesis will depend on whether this is taken to be the Holy Spirit or the spiritual state in which Christ's body was made alive in the tomb. There is no need to conclude that, since Christ was going to the realm of the damned to speak to spirits, He descended in His spirit alone.

"He went and preached unto the spirits in prison." Christ descended to hell not as victim but as Victor, to proclaim His victory. The Thorough Declaration states: "In ancient Christian teachers...as well as in some among our teachers dissimilar explanations...concerning the descent of Christ to hell are found." According to some contemporary commentators, "a descent into Hades by a divinity or hero is in antiquity a common myth of solar origin" (*Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* I, 826). That "myth" is found in ancient Semitic myths, as well as in the myths of Greece and Rome.

Calvin's *Commentary* defines the prison (φυλακή) to which Jesus went as follows: "φυλακή means a watchtower...Godly souls were watching in hope of the salvation promised them, as though they saw it afar off." Some commentators restrict the spirits to whom Christ preached to supernatural beings, to the fallen angels of Genesis 6:1-4. "Peter depends on the current tradition in which the original myth (Gn 6:1-4) has been modified and amplified" (*Expositor's Greek NT ad loc*). But the Holy Scriptures know of only one prison that confines spirits, and that is hell.

The context makes it clear that those to whom Christ preached were ἀπειθήσασιν, unbelievers who spurned the patient mercy of a loving God. When Christ descended to hell to proclaim a message, this was not preaching in the hope of leading to repentance. This was no second chance for the damned; the people Christ addressed were beyond that. There was no mission work done in hell.

The question whether Jesus preached law or gospel in hell lies outside the scope of Peter's presentation. Professor John Meyer used to point out that even the preaching of the gospel would have been tantamount to a proclamation of law, since those who heard it would have been convinced of their unbelief in rejecting the only message which can save the sinner. Peter's interest lies in the *fact* of Christ's descent after His vivification, and in the fact that He made proclamation (ἐκήρυξεν) to the damned.

Verse 20: "Which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water."

ἀπειθήσασιν—the apostle singles out Noah’s contemporaries as classic examples of man’s unbelief in the face of God’s patience. The absence of the article is significant. The article τοῖς would have limited Christ’s hearers to Noah’s unbelieving contemporaries, but Peter emphasizes that Christ’s audience was not so restricted. He preached to all the spirits in prison, *such as were disobedient* when, e.g., God’s amazing grace delayed His judgment 120 years.

ἀπεξεδέχετο—God’s longsuffering waited patiently, held out for a long time under heavy provocation, in order to give sinners time to repent and to take refuge in the ark which God had ordered Noah to prepare before the judgment fell.

κατασκευαζομένης κιβωτοῦ—Noah’s preparing the ark is mentioned not only because it was an act of testimony against the rampant unbelief of the day, but also because it was during that construction period that unbelief had a field day ridiculing Noah for his belief and his implicit obedience. Such was the character of the unbelief which had brought them to hell.

διεσώθησαν δι’ ὕδατος—the same water that drowned millions of screaming unbelievers at Noah’s time carried the ark and its precious cargo high above the debris and destruction and death to safety. The Christ whom the damned saw in terror in hell is the same Christ who is our hope—now, and when we see Him on the great Day that is coming. For a more detailed exposition of this passage and of the doctrine of the *descensus* see “Christ’s Descent into Hell” (*WLQ* 57:98 and 180), by Pastor Gerhardt Struck.

The thoughts of the text and of Article IX may be combined in the following outline:

The Outline

Introduction: Christ’s descent into hell is a little known article of the Christian faith, though we confess it regularly.

Theme: Christ Descended into Hell

I. A scriptural doctrine

- A. The fact: on Easter Sunday morning Christ’s spirit was suddenly united with His body, and in an instant Christ descended to hell and preached there.
- B. The reason: to proclaim the victory He had won.
 1. Testimony against unbelief (typified by Noah’s contemporaries)
 2. No preaching for the sake of leading to repentance

Transition: That sermon offered no comfort to the damned, but it does for us.

II. A comforting doctrine

- A. Christ’s expiatory work is completed.
 1. He had smashed the power of Satan, hell
 2. He had restored us to God (*προσαγάγη*, v 18)
- B. Neither hell nor devil can harm us.

Luther: “Through Christ hell has been torn to pieces and the devil’s kingdom and power utterly destroyed...so that it should no longer harm or overwhelm us.”

Assurance for the believer: even though you may suffer, bear in mind that all enemies of Christ (from those now causing you trouble to the damned and their leader in hell) are Christ’s footstool; His foot is on their neck.

Conclusion: Much about the *descensus* has not been revealed, and what God has not told us, we should be happy not to know. But what God has told us about this phase of Christ’s work is rich with comfort.