

Christ's Descent into "Hell"

ISSUE: Every time we recite the Apostles' Creed, we proclaim our belief that Christ descended into "hell" after His death. But isn't hell a place of everlasting torment for the damned? Did Christ actually descend to this hell of eternal damnation, or is this another sense in which the Church understands "hell"?

RESPONSE: The English word "hell" describes two different places in the Bible. The first, referred to in the Apostle's Creed, is "*Hades*" (Rev. 20:14) or "abode of the dead," the place where Christ spoke to the spirits in prison after His death (1 Pet. 3:18-19; 4:6).¹ This first hell is also known as the "limbo of the fathers." The more commonly known "hell of damnation"² (or "*Gehenna*"³) is the place where those who die in a state of mortal sin go, eternally separated by self-exclusion from God and the blessed.⁴ *Hades* was emptied after Christ's descent, with the just going to heaven and the wicked going to the eternal hell. *Hades* is known today as Purgatory, where God purifies the saved sinner so that he can live in heaven with the Trinity (cf. Rev. 21:27; 1 Cor. 3:15).⁵

DISCUSSION: Before Christ's death and resurrection, the gates of heaven were closed to all those who had died, for redemption had not yet come into the world to atone for Adam's original sin. Instead, all the dead went to "hell" or the "abode of the dead"⁶ "*Sheol*" in Hebrew or "*Hades*" in Greek. All souls, whether just or unjust, went to this hell and were "deprived of the vision of God" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 633). All did not share the same lot in *Hades*, as Christ's parable about the poor man Lazarus shows (Lk. 16:22-26; *Catechism*, no. 633). When Christ died, he went down into *Hades* in order to preach to the dead (1 Pet 4:6), freeing the just who had gone before Him.⁶ He did not go there to deliver the damned nor destroy the hell of damnation.⁷ Christ sent the damned to eternal perdition.

Thus, the "descent into Hell" referred to in the Creed affirms two doctrinal truths: Christ really did die⁸ he entered the abode of the dead⁹ and He fulfilled His saving mission for all times and all peoples, rescuing even those who had died before His birth. The author of Hebrews clarifies that to be a faithful high priest it was necessary for Christ to become like his brethren in every way but sin (Heb. 2:17, 4:15; 1 Pet. 2:22). Thus, Christ's experience of death and the descent into the abode of the dead were necessary for the salvation of all the just.

Through Christ's Resurrection from the dead and ascension into heaven, He opened the gates of heaven that had been closed since the banishment from Eden (Gen. 3:23, 24). Having conquered death and sin, Christ has "the keys of death and Hades" (Rev. 1:18), the power to release men from the wages of sin, both here on earth and in Purgatory. That Christ has the "key of *Hades*" affirms that *Hades* continues as Purgatory after His descent. Those who die and are "perfectly purified" go to heaven (*Catechism*, no. 1023), those who die in mortal sin go to hell,⁸ and the faithful in need of purification go to *Hades*. However, as the Bible affirms, *Hades*/Purgatory will ultimately be destroyed (Rev. 20:14).

¹ 1 Pet. 3:-18-19; 1 Pet. 4:6; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 631-35.

² *Catechism*, no. 633.

³ Mt. 10:28 (Catholic New American Bible). The Catholic Revised Standard Version uses the word "hell" in this context, referring to the place of eternal damnation, while using "*hades*" to refer to the limbo of the fathers.

⁴ *Ibid.*, nos. 1033-37.

⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 1030-32.

⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 633.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Cf. Mt. 13:41-42, 25:41; Rev. 19:21.

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