

## He Descended into Hell

Matthew 27:45-46

Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 44

*Studies in the Heidelberg Catechism #22*

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**W**E hear the voice of God in his Word tonight as he testifies to us about his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Let's raise our voices in

response in the words of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 44:

Q.44. Why does the creed add, "He descended to hell"?

**A. To assure me during attacks of deepest dread and temptation that Christ my Lord, by suffering unspeakable anguish, pain, and terror of soul, on the cross but also earlier, has delivered me from hellish anguish and torment.**

I want to begin with a couple points of application. While a minority of Reformed and evangelical authors and even denominations today believe this clause in the Creed is either dubious or an embarrassment, the Heidelberg Catechism expounds the Apostles' Creed as our "*undoubted* Christian faith" (Q&A 22). The confession of Jesus Christ's descent into hell is part of our inheritance as catholic Christians. When we recite it in worship and study it in our Catechism, we are linking ourselves to believers in Africa, Asia, Europe, South America, and here as members of the catholic church.

And we need this experience of a transcendent reality in a culture of the tyranny of the urgent.

And it's vital to my comfort **during attacks of deepest dread and temptation** that I seek to know what the Lord did for me **by suffering unspeakable anguish, pain, and terror of soul, on the cross but also earlier** how I am to draw spiritual strength from by his **deliver[ance] of me from hellish anguish and torment**. One old writer said Christ's descent was "one of the most mysterious, essential, and useful doctrines of our holy Religion."<sup>1</sup> His "descent" is foundational to my assurance because it expresses that he not only identified with me from the time of his conception but that he experienced for me the wrath of God in body and soul. So how does it help **assure me during attacks of deepest dread and temptation?**

### **It Gives Me Assurance in Doubt**

First, "he descended into hell" *gives me assurance in doubt*. When I doubt, I need to go back to what God has already promised me in his Word. And when I hear Jesus on the cross I see how he has kept God's promises. In the Old Testament there is a prophecy that the Messiah would be identified

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<sup>1</sup> *Sacred Dissertations*, 2:148, 141. See also John Calvin; William Perkins.

with sinners in death, but that God would preserve him even in death. Let's look at Psalm 16 for a few minutes:

- <sup>8</sup>I have set the LORD always before me:  
because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.  
<sup>9</sup>Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoiceth:  
my flesh also shall rest in hope.  
<sup>10</sup>For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell;  
neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.

Psalm 16 speaks of his "soul" and parallels it to "holy one." This is all a way of saying "me." And "Sheol" is paralleled with "corruption," because in this context, it means the grave. In terms of his body, the Lord Jesus Christ descended into the grave and experienced the state of death. This is how the New Testament authoritatively interprets Psalm 16. The apostles Peter and Paul apply this text to the resurrection of Jesus Christ *from the grave* (Acts 2:29 cf. 13:34-35). So when Jesus' body was buried in the grave (*Sheol*), his human soul ascended to his Father. Jesus underwent every stage of life like us from his incarnation to his experience of death and burial.

This assures me because he obeyed God's Word and shows me that all God said is true in Christ. And as we saw last time, the fact that Jesus identified with me in his burial means "he really died;" and if he really died, then my sins really died with him. So his burial is a testimony to me that I

am forgiven and free from the condemning power of sin.

## **It Gives Me Strength in Suffering**

“He descended into hell” also *gives me strength in suffering*. It brings me comfort in my own physical, spiritual, and emotional sufferings. What a wonderful comfort to know that I am not alone in my struggles in this life because the Son of God suffered hell for me, as a human in my place. He was “in all things...made like unto his brethren” (Heb. 2:17) and “in all points tempted like as we are” (Heb. 4:15). Because of his incarnation and sufferings, our Lord was and continues to be a merciful, faithful, and sympathetic high priest (Heb. 2:17, 4:15) who was “able to help them that are tempted.” (Heb. 2:18) Meditate upon Jesus’ bodily sufferings when you are suffering in body. Draw strength in your emotional, psychological, and inner sufferings from the fact that our Lord underwent everything you undergo. He suffered the curse of God on the cross that came upon Adam and Eve in the beginning. That curse is expressed in, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.” To be forsaken by God is to be given over to his wrath without hope of mercy. That’s what Jesus experienced for me on the cross.

And he experienced this *fully* and satisfied it *fully*! My assurance is that **Christ my Lord, by suffering unspeakable anguish, pain, and terror of**

**soul, on the cross but also earlier, has delivered me from hellish anguish and torment.**

Some believe he actually had to undergo more punishment after the cross by his human soul literally descending into the place of eternal punishment—hell. While there, Jesus underwent further suffering on behalf of our sins to finish the work of our redemption. This is the view popularized by today’s prosperity gospel preachers. But Jesus said *tetelestai*, “It is finished”—using a perfect tense verb to specify that Jesus accomplished the work of redemption that was prophesied in the Old Testament Scriptures and that he was sent from eternity to do. Michael Horton has a wonderful description of this:

...it was not the mockery and loathing of men, nor the law and judgment of Rome, that Jesus feared...On this night, the Son is alone in hell. Not even the Father is his friend. Nobody loves the Son in this hour...He is the enemy both of his wicked creation and of his righteous Father...At last, the moment came: God turned his face of wrath toward his bleeding, dying Son, and made him drink that cup of rejection to the last drop. See here the price of your redemption: God must hate his own sinless Son.

### **It Gives Me Peace in the Face of Death**

“He descended into hell” finally *gives me peace in the face of death*. I have no reason to fear death. Because Christ suffered the darkness of hell, I can sing and pray with David: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the

shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me” (Ps. 23:4). Since Christ entered hell’s agony but came forth in triumph, I can recite the victory march of the apostolic church: “The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 15:56–57). I am confident of victory because Christ has experienced all the emotions, pains, and torments of death for me of all people. As one writer put it:

It is no longer *necessary* that we go to hell. And we shall no longer be required to go to hell in order to ask ourselves there: why has God forsaken us? If we think we have occasion for this question, we should consider that Jesus Christ put it long ago and answered it in our place. How could His way to hell have been other than a victorious way? And by this victorious way He has made a breathing space for us, i.e. the peace that garrisons our hearts and minds, that is and continues to be peace in face of every ordeal because, passing all understanding, it is His own peace, the peace of God. (Karl Barth)

“He descended into hell.” This phrase is our heritage; This phrase is our comfort in doubt, in suffering, and in the face of death itself because faced them all for us his whole life, but especially on the cross, crying, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” Let us pray...