

DID JESUS DESCEND INTO HELL?

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For Christ . . . having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; in which also He sent and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark . . . For the gospel has for this purpose been preached even to those who are dead . . . I Peter 3:18-20 and 4:6.

The Apostles' Creed, though not directly written by the apostles, is a commendable popular summary of the apostolic faith and teaching, and in full agreement with New Testament doctrine. It is undoubtedly the best well-known summary of the Christian faith ever written in so few words. It is Trinitarian in doctrine expressing faith: "in God the Father Almighty; in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord; and in the Holy Spirit."

The earliest known written expressions of the Apostles' Creed were by Rufinus in Latin (c. AD 390) and by Marcellus in Greek (AD 336-341), neither of which included the phrase "He [Jesus] descended into Hell." This phrase was added from the Aquilejan Creed at a later date. This Aquilejan and Apostle's Creed is the one commonly recited, for example, at an Episcopalian Sunday worship service, or at a combined protestant worship service such as I attended when I was in boot camp during my U.S. Navy duty.

The inserted phrase "He [Jesus] descended into Hell" is plainly a misinterpretation of First Peter 3:18-20 and 4:6. In *Genesis: A Biblical Theology*, Dr. Lin discusses these First Peter passages in Chapter Two, The Times of Noah. The pertinent passage follows:

Throughout the Noachian period of grace during which he constructed the ark, the people of Noah's day continued in their disobedience. Later revelation speaks of Christ's "being put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the Spirit; by whom also He went and preached unto the spirits [now] in prison who long ago were disobedient when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built" (1 Pet. 3:18-20). How could Christ by the Spirit preach the gospel to disobedient people alive in Noah's time yet who were definitely dead when Peter wrote in his epistle: "the gospel was preached to those who are now dead" (1 Pet. 4:6)? Peter also tells us that Noah was "a preacher of righteousness" (2 Pet. 2:5). Now no one can be a preacher in truth and power unless he has been sent and anointed by the Spirit. As the Scriptures say, "How shall they preach unless they are sent" (Rom. 10:15) and "you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be My witnesses" (Acts 1:8).

The passage in First Peter 3:18-19 clearly explains that Christ Himself did not preach to spirits alive in Noah's day, but by the Spirit. It was the Holy Spirit who empowered Noah in his proclamations to the people as he was building the ark. Furthermore, in the Orient when one mentions a deceased person, he does not refer to him according to his former living status, but according to his current situation as "the dead" or the like. For example, when she was persuading her daughters-in-law to return to their mothers' houses, Naomi wished that the Lord might deal kindly with them as they had dealt with "the dead" (that is, their husbands) and with her (Ruth 1:8; 2:20). So it is that "the spirits in prison" in 1 Peter 3:19 definitely refers to the disobedient people living in Noah's time but who were dead when Peter was writing his epistle (1 Pet. 4:6). Any other explanation

of 1 Peter 3:18-20 would seem to make our Lord either unfair (He descended into Hell and preached His triumph over death and men's evil deeds only to the spirits from Noah's time, but not to the "spirits in prison" as a whole) or, as some hold, He gave the dead a second chance to repent. The Holy Spirit challenges this last view by His unqualified statement: "It is appointed unto men once to die and after this [death] comes the judgment" (Heb. 9:27). In His teaching concerning the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus strongly implies that following death one's destiny is irreversibly final: "A great chasm has been fixed [*esteriktai*, perfect passive of the verb *sterizo*, meaning 'has been firmly fixed and remains perpetually so'] so that . . . none may cross over from there to us" (Luke 16:26, retranslated). Thus, to put it all together, Christ Himself did not preach to spirits in Hell. He anointed Noah through the Holy Spirit who resurrected Him, and it was Noah who proclaimed God's way of righteousness to a disobedient people—people who in Peter's day, more than 2,000 years later, were "spirits in prison," waiting for God's coming judgment because of their indifference to His Word as proclaimed by Noah.

Neither does Ephesians 4:9 support an interpretation that Jesus descended into Hell. The Ephesian passage reads: "Now this expression, 'He ascended,' what does it mean except that he had descended into the lower parts of the earth?" "Of the earth" is a genitive of apposition explaining that Jesus descended into the lower parts, which is the earth. Further that Jesus first descended to the earth in verse 9 balances the fact that Jesus later ascended into heaven as verse 8 and 10 explain.

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