

# Did Jesus Descend Into Hell?

Some have taken passages such as 1 Peter 3:18-20 and 1 Peter 4:6 and argued for a belief that Jesus descended into hell between his crucifixion and resurrection. Wayne Grudem does a good job of talking about the origins of this phrase and what the Bible teaches about this subject. I share with you his words from his systematic theology book.

**f. Did Christ Descend Into Hell?** It is sometimes argued that Christ descended into hell after he died. The phrase “he descended into hell” does not occur in the Bible. But the widely used Apostles’ Creed reads, “was crucified, dead, and buried, he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead.” Does this mean that Christ endured further suffering after his death on the cross? As we shall see below, an examination of the biblical evidence indicates that he did not. But before looking at the relevant biblical texts, it is appropriate to examine the phrase “he descended into hell” in the Apostles’ Creed.

## (1) The Origin of the Phrase, “He Descended Into Hell”

A murky background lies behind much of the history of the phrase itself. Its origins, where they can be found, are far from praiseworthy. The great church historian Philip Schaff has summarized the development of the Apostles’ Creed in an extensive chart, which is reproduced on pages 583–85.

This chart shows that, unlike the Nicene Creed and the Chalcedonian Definition, the Apostles’ Creed was not written or approved by a single church council at one specific time. Rather, it gradually took shape from about A.D. 200 to 750.

It is surprising to find that the phrase “he descended into hell” was not found in any of the early versions of the Creed (in the versions used in Rome, in the rest of Italy, and in Africa) until it appeared in one of two versions from Rufinus in A.D. 390. Then it was not included again in any version of the Creed until A.D. 650. Moreover, Rufinus, the only person who included it before A.D. 650, did not think that it meant that Christ descended into hell, but understood the phrase simply to mean that Christ was “buried.” In other words, he took it to mean that Christ “descended into the grave.” (The Greek form has ἄδης (G87) which can mean just “grave,” not γέεννα (G1147) “hell, place of punishment.”). We should also note that the phrase only appears in one of the two versions of the Creed that we have from Rufinus: it was not in the Roman form of the Creed that he preserved.

This means, therefore, that until A.D. 650 no version of the Creed included this phrase with the intention of saying that Christ “descended into hell—the only version to include the phrase before A.D. 650 gives it a different meaning. At this point one wonders if the term *apostolic* can in any sense be applied to this phrase, or if it really has a rightful place in a creed whose title claims for itself descent from the earliest apostles of Christ.

This survey of the historical development of the phrase also raises the possibility that when the phrase first began to be more commonly used, it may have been in other versions (now lost to us) that did not have the expression “and buried.” If so, it probably would have meant to others just what it meant to Rufinus: “descended into the grave.” But later when the phrase was incorporated into different versions of the Creed that already had the phrase “and buried,” some other explanation had to be given to it. This mistaken insertion of the phrase after the words “and

buried”—apparently done by someone around A.D. 650—led to all sorts of attempts to explain “he descended into hell” in some way that did not contradict the rest of Scripture.

Some have taken it to mean that Christ suffered the pains of hell while on the cross. Calvin, for example, says that “Christ’s descent into hell” refers to the fact that he not only died a bodily death but that “it was expedient at the same time for him to undergo the severity of God’s vengeance, to appease his wrath and satisfy his just judgment.”

Similarly, the Heidelberg Catechism, Question 44, asks,

Why is it added: He descended into Hades?

Answer: That in my greatest temptations I may be assured that Christ, my Lord, by his inexpressible anguish, pains, and terrors which he suffered in his soul on the cross and before, has redeemed me from the anguish and torment of hell.

But is this a satisfactory explanation of the phrase, “he descended into hell”? While it is true that Christ suffered the outpouring of God’s wrath on the cross, this explanation does not really fit the phrase in the Apostles’ Creed—“descended” hardly represents this idea, and the placement of the phrase after “was crucified, dead, and buried” makes this an artificial and unconvincing interpretation.

Others have understood it to mean that Christ continued in the “state of death” until his resurrection. The Westminster Larger Catechism, Question 50, says,

Christ’s humiliation after his death consisted in his being buried, and continuing in the state of the dead, and under the power of death till the third day; which hath been otherwise expressed in these words, He descended into hell.

Though it is true that Christ continued in the state of death until the third day, once again it is a strained and unpersuasive explanation of “he descended into hell,” for the placement of the phrase would then give the awkward sense, “he was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended to being dead.” This interpretation does not explain what the words first meant in this sequence but is rather an unconvincing attempt to salvage some theologically acceptable sense out of them.

Moreover, the English word “hell” has no such sense as simply “being dead” (though the Greek word ᾅδης, G87, can mean this), so this becomes a doubly artificial explanation for English-speaking people.

Finally, some have argued that the phrase means just what it appears to mean on first reading: that Christ actually did descend into hell after his death on the cross. It is easy to understand the Apostles’ Creed to mean just this (indeed, that is certainly the natural sense), but then another question arises: Can this idea be supported from Scripture?

## (2) Possible Biblical Support for a Descent Into Hell

Support for the idea that Christ descended into hell has been found primarily in five passages: Acts 2:27; Romans 10:6–7; Ephesians 4:8–9; 1 Peter 3:18–20; and 1 Peter 4:6. (A few other passages have been appealed to, but less convincingly.) On closer inspection, do any of those passages clearly establish this teaching?

(a) *Acts 2:27*. This is part of Peter’s sermon on the Day of Pentecost, where he is quoting Psalm 16:10. In the King James Version the verse reads: “because thou wilt not *leave my soul in hell* neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.”

Does this mean that Christ entered hell after he died? Not necessarily, because another sense is certainly possible for these verses. The word “hell” here represents a New Testament Greek term (ἄδης, G87) and an Old Testament Hebrew term (גֵּהֶנְמֹתַיִם, H8619, popularly translated as sheol) that can mean simply “the grave” or “death” (the state of being dead). Thus, the NIV translates: “Because you will not *abandon me to the grave* nor will you let your Holy One see decay” (Acts 2:27). This sense is preferable because the context emphasizes that Christ’s body rose from the grave, unlike David’s, which remained in the grave. The reasoning is: “My body also will live in hope” (v. 26), “because you will not abandon me to the grave” (v. 27). Peter is using David’s psalm to show that Christ’s body did not decay—he is therefore unlike David, who “died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day” (v. 29 NIV). Therefore this passage about Christ’s resurrection from the grave does not convincingly support the idea that Christ descended into hell.

(b) *Romans 10:6–7*. These verses contain two rhetorical questions, again Old Testament quotations (from Deut. 30:13): “Do not say in your heart, “Who will ascend into heaven?” (that is, to bring Christ down) or “Who will descend into the abyss?” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).” But this passage hardly teaches that Christ descended into hell. The point of the passage is that Paul is telling people not to ask these questions, because Christ is not far away—he is near—and faith in him is as near as confessing with our mouth and believing in our heart (v. 9). These prohibited questions are questions of unbelief, not assertions of what Scripture teaches. However, some may object that Paul would not have anticipated that his readers would ask such questions unless it was widely known that Christ did in fact descend “into the abyss.” However, even if this were true, Scripture would not be saying or implying that Christ went into “hell” (in the sense of a place of punishment for the dead, ordinarily expressed by Gk. γέεννα, G1147), but rather that he went into “the abyss” (Gk. ἄβυσσος (G12) a term which often in the LXX is used of the depths of the ocean [Gen. 1:2; 7:11; 8:2; Deut. 8:7; Ps. 106:26 (107:26)], but it can also apparently refer just to the realm of the dead [Ps. 70:20 (71:20)]).

Paul here uses the word “deep” (ἄβυσσος (G12)) as a contrast to “heaven” in order to give the sense of a place that is unreachable, inaccessible to human beings. The contrast is not, “Who shall go to find Christ in a place of great blessing (heaven) or a place of great punishment (hell)?” but rather, “Who shall go to find Christ in a place that is inaccessibly high (heaven) or in a place that is inaccessibly low (the deep, or the realm of death)?” No clear affirmation or denial of a “descent into hell” can be found in this passage.

(c) *Ephesians 4:8–9*. Here Paul writes, “In saying, “He ascended,’ what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth?”

Does this mean that Christ “descended” to hell? It is at first unclear what is meant by “the lower parts of the earth,” but another translation seems to give the best sense: “What does “he ascended’ mean except that he also descended to the *lower, earthly regions*?” (NIV). Here the NIV takes “descended” to refer to Christ’s coming to earth as a baby (the Incarnation). The last four words are an acceptable understanding of the Greek text, taking the phrase “the lower regions of the earth” to mean “lower regions *which are* the earth” (the grammatical form in Greek would then be called a genitive of apposition). We do the same thing in English—for example, in the phrase “the city of Chicago,” we mean “the city which is Chicago.”

The NIV rendering is preferable in this context because Paul is saying that the Christ who went up to heaven (in his ascension) is the same one who earlier came down from heaven (v. 10). That “descent” from heaven occurred, of course, when Christ came to be born as a man. So the verse speaks of the incarnation, not of a descent into hell.

(d) *1 Peter 3:18–20*. For many people this is the most puzzling passage on this entire subject. Peter tells us that Christ was “put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit; *in which he went and preached to the spirits in prison* who formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark” (RSV).

### **Does this refer to Christ preaching in hell?**

Some have taken “he went and preached to the spirits in prison” to mean that Christ went into hell and preached to the spirits who were there—either proclaiming the gospel and offering a second chance to repent, or just proclaiming that he had triumphed over them and that they were eternally condemned.

But these interpretations fail to explain adequately either the passage itself or its setting in this context. Peter does not say that Christ preached to spirits generally, but only to those “who formerly did not obey ... *during the building of the ark.*” Such a limited audience—those who disobeyed during the building of the ark—would be a strange group for Christ to travel to hell and preach to. If Christ proclaimed his triumph, why only to these sinners and not to all? And if he offered a second chance for salvation, why only to these sinners and not to all? Even more difficult for this view is the fact that Scripture elsewhere indicates that there is no opportunity for repentance after death (Luke 16:26; Heb. 10:26–27).

Moreover, the context of 1 Peter 3 makes “preaching in hell” unlikely. Peter is encouraging his readers to witness boldly to hostile unbelievers around them. He just told them to “always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you” (1 Peter 3:15 NIV). This evangelistic motif would lose its urgency if Peter were teaching a second chance for salvation after death. And it would not fit at all with a “preaching” of condemnation.

### **Does it refer to Christ preaching to fallen angels?**

To give a better explanation for these difficulties, several commentators have proposed taking “spirits in prison” to mean demonic spirits, the spirits of fallen angels, and have said that Christ proclaimed condemnation to these demons. This (it is claimed) would comfort Peter’s readers by showing them that the demonic forces oppressing them would also be defeated by Christ.

However, Peter’s readers would have to go through an incredibly complicated reasoning process to draw this conclusion when Peter does not explicitly teach it. They would have to reason from (1) some demons who sinned long ago were condemned, to (2) other demons are now inciting your human persecutors, to (3) those demons will likewise be condemned someday, to (4) therefore your persecutors will finally be judged as well. Finally Peter’s readers would get to Peter’s point: (5) Therefore don’t fear your persecutors.

Those who hold this “preaching to fallen angels” view must assume that Peter’s readers would “read between the lines” and conclude all this (points 2–5) from the simple statement that Christ “preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly did not obey” (1 Peter 3:19–20). But does it not seem too farfetched to say that Peter knew his readers would read all this into the text?

Moreover, Peter emphasizes hostile *persons* not demons, in the context (1 Peter 3:14, 16). And where would Peter’s readers get the idea that angels sinned “during the building of the ark”? There is nothing of that in the Genesis story about the building of the ark. And (in spite of what some have claimed), if we look at all the traditions of Jewish interpretation of the flood story, we find no mention of angels sinning specifically “during the building of the ark.” Therefore the view that Peter is speaking of Christ’s proclamation of judgment to fallen angels is really not persuasive either.

### **Does it refer to Christ's Proclaiming release to Old Testament saints?**

Another explanation is that Christ, after his death, went and proclaimed release to Old Testament believers who had been unable to enter heaven until the completion of Christ's redemptive work.

But again we may question whether this view adequately accounts for what the text actually says. It does not say that Christ preached to those who were believers or faithful to God, but to those "who formerly *did not obey*—the emphasis is on their disobedience. Moreover, Peter does not specify Old Testament believers generally, but only those who were disobedient "in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark" (1 Peter 3:20).

Finally, Scripture gives us no clear evidence to make us think that full access to the blessings of being in God's presence in heaven were withheld from Old Testament believers when they died—indeed, several passages suggest that believers who died before Christ's death did enter into the presence of God at once because their sins were forgiven by trusting in the Messiah who was to come (Gen. 5:24; 2 Sam. 12:23; Pss. 16:11; 17:15; 23:6; Eccl. 12:7; Matt. 22:31–32; Luke 16:22; Rom. 4:1–8; Heb. 11:5).

### **A more satisfying explanation.**

The most satisfactory explanation of 1 Peter 3:19–20 seems rather to be one proposed (but not really defended) long ago by Augustine: the passage refers not to something Christ did between his death and resurrection, but to what he did "in the spiritual realm of existence" (or "through the Spirit") *at the time of Noah*. When Noah was building the ark, Christ "in spirit" was preaching through Noah to the hostile unbelievers around him.

This view gains support from two other statements of Peter. In 1 Peter 1:11, he says that the "Spirit of Christ" was speaking in the Old Testament prophets. This suggests that Peter could readily have thought that the "Spirit of Christ" was speaking through Noah as well. Then in 2 Peter 2:5, he calls Noah a "*preacher of righteousness*" (NIV), using the noun (κηρυξ, G3061) that comes from the same root as the verb "preached" (ἐκήρυξεν, from κηρύσσω, G3062) in 1 Peter 3:19. So it seems likely that when Christ "preached to the spirits in prison" he did so through Noah in the days before the flood.

The people to whom Christ preached through Noah were unbelievers on the earth at the time of Noah, but Peter calls them "spirits in prison" because they are now in the prison of hell—even though they were not just "spirits" but persons on earth when the preaching was done. (The NASB says Christ preached "to the spirits now in prison.") We can speak the same way in English: "I knew President Clinton when he was a college student" is an appropriate statement, even though he was not president when he was in college. The sentence means, "I knew the man who is now President Clinton when he was still a student in college." So "Christ preached to the spirits in prison" means "Christ preached to people who are now spirits in prison when they were still persons on earth."<sup>30</sup>

This interpretation is very appropriate to the larger context of 1 Peter 3:13–22. The parallel between the situation of Noah and the situation of Peter’s readers is clear at several points:

<b>Noah</b>	<b>Peter’s readers</b>
Righteous minority	Righteous minority
Surrounded by hostile unbelievers	Surrounded by hostile unbelievers
God’s judgment was near	God’s judgment may come soon (1 Peter 4:5, 7; 2 Peter 3:10)
Noah witnessed boldly	They should witness boldly
(by Christ’s power)	by Christ’s power (1 Peter 3:14, 16–17; 3:15; 4:11)
Noah was finally saved	They will finally be saved (1 Peter 3:13–14; 4:13; 5:10)

Such an understanding of the text seems to be by far the most likely solution to a puzzling passage. Yet this means that our fourth possible support for a descent of Christ into hell also turns up negative—the text speaks rather of something Christ did on earth at the time of Noah.

(e) *1 Peter 4:6*. This fifth and final passage says, “For this is why the gospel was preached even to the dead, that though judged in the flesh like men, they might live in the spirit like God.”

Does this verse mean that Christ went to hell and preached the gospel to those who had died? If so, it would be the only passage in the Bible that taught a “second chance” for salvation after death and would contradict passages such as Luke 16:19–31 and Hebrews 9:27, which clearly seem to deny this possibility. Moreover, the passage does not explicitly say that Christ preached to people after they had died, and could rather mean that the gospel in general was preached (this verse does not even say that Christ preached) to people who are now dead, but that it was preached to them while they were still alive on earth.

This is a common explanation, and it seems to fit this verse much better. It finds support in the second word of the verse, “this,” which refers back to the final judgment mentioned at the end of verse 5. Peter is saying that it was because of the final judgment that the gospel was preached to the dead.

This would comfort the readers concerning their Christian friends who had already died. They may have wondered, “Did the gospel benefit them, since it didn’t save them from death?” Peter answers that the reason the gospel was preached to those who had died was not to save them from physical death (they were “judged in the flesh like men”) but to save them from final judgment (they will “live in the spirit like God”). Therefore, the fact that they had died did not indicate that the gospel had failed in its purpose—for they would surely live forever in the spiritual realm.

Thus, “the dead” are people who have died and are now dead, even though they were alive and on earth when the gospel was preached to them. (The NIV translates, “For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to *those who are now dead*,” and NASB has “those who are dead.”) This avoids the doctrinal problem of a “second chance” of salvation after death and fits both the wording and the context of the verse.

We conclude, therefore, that this last passage, when viewed in its context, turns out to provide no convincing support for the doctrine of a descent of Christ into hell.

At this point, people on all sides of the question of whether Christ actually descended into hell should be able to agree at least that the idea of Christ's "descent into hell" is not taught clearly or explicitly in any passage of Scripture. And many people (including the present author) will conclude that this idea is not taught in Scripture at all. But beyond the question of whether any passage positively teaches this idea, we must ask whether it is contrary to any passages of Scripture.

### **(3) Biblical Opposition to a "Descent Into Hell"**

In addition to the fact that there is little if any biblical support for a descent of Christ into hell, there are some New Testament texts that argue against the possibility of Christ's going to hell after his death.

Jesus' words to the thief on the cross, "Today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43), imply that after Jesus died his soul (or spirit) went immediately to the presence of the Father in heaven, even though his body remained on earth and was buried. Some people deny this by arguing that "Paradise" is a place distinct from heaven, but in both of the other New Testament uses the word clearly means "heaven": in 2 Corinthians 12:4 it is the place to which Paul was caught up in his revelation of heaven, and in Revelation 2:7 it is the place where we find the tree of life—which is clearly heaven in Revelation 22:2 and 14.

In addition, the cry of Jesus, "It is finished" (John 19:30) strongly suggests that Christ's suffering was finished at that moment and so was his alienation from the Father because of bearing our sin. This implies that he would not descend into hell, but would go at once into the Father's presence.

Finally, the cry, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46), also suggests that Christ expected (correctly) the immediate end of his suffering and estrangement and the welcoming of his spirit into heaven by God the Father (note Stephen's similar cry in Acts 7:59).

These texts indicate, then, that Christ in his death experienced the same things believers in this present age experience when they die: his dead body remained on earth and was buried (as ours will be), but his spirit (or soul) passed immediately into the presence of God in heaven (just as ours will). Then on the first Easter morning, Christ's spirit was reunited with his body and he was raised from the dead—just as Christians who have died will (when Christ returns) be reunited to their bodies and raised in their perfect resurrection bodies to new life.

This fact has pastoral encouragement for us: we need not fear death, not only because eternal life lies on the other side, but also because we know that our Savior himself has gone through exactly the same experience we will go through—he has prepared, even sanctified the way, and we follow him with confidence each step of that way. This is much greater comfort regarding death than could ever be given by any view of a descent into hell.

### **(4) Conclusion Regarding the Apostles' Creed and the Question of Christ's Possible Descent Into Hell**

Does the phrase "he descended into hell" deserve to be retained in the Apostles' Creed alongside the great doctrines of the faith on which all can agree? The single argument in its favor seems to be the fact that it has been around so long. But an old mistake is still a mistake—and as long as it has been around there has been confusion and disagreement over its meaning.

On the other side, there are several compelling reasons against keeping the phrase. It has no clear warrant from Scripture and indeed seems to be contradicted by some passages in Scripture. It has no claim to being “apostolic” and no support (in the sense of a “descent into hell”) from the first six centuries of the church. It was not in the earliest versions of the Creed and was only included in it later because of an apparent misunderstanding about its meaning. Unlike every other phrase in the Creed, it represents not some major doctrine on which all Christians agree, but rather a statement about which most Christians seem to disagree. It is at best confusing and in most cases misleading for modern Christians. My own judgment is that there would be all gain and no loss if it were dropped from the Creed once for all.

Concerning the doctrinal question of whether Christ did descend into hell after he died, the answer from several passages of Scripture seems clearly to be no.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Grudem, W. A. (2004). *Systematic theology: an introduction to biblical doctrine* (pp. 588–594). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House.