

SECOND READING: Psalm 139: 1-18

O LORD, you have searched me and known me. ² You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. ³ You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. ⁴ Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely. ⁵ You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. ⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it. ⁷ Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? ⁸ If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. ⁹ If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, ¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. ¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and night wraps itself around me," ¹² even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.

¹³ For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. ¹⁴ I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. ¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. ¹⁶ Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. ¹⁷ How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! ¹⁸ I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you.

This is the word of the Lord. THANKS BE TO GOD.

FIRST READING: 1 Peter 3:18-22

¹⁸ For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹ in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, ²⁰ who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight lives, were saved through water. ²¹ And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

This is the word of the Lord. **THANKS BE TO GOD**

“I Believe...He descended into Hell”

Recently, I saw a joke which made me laugh. “It seems that a man from Illinois left the snow-filled streets of Chicago for a vacation in Florida, and his wife was on a business trip and was planning to meet him there the next day. When he reached his hotel, he decided to send his wife a quick e-mail. But the trouble was he was unable to find the scrap of paper on which he had written her e-mail address, so he did his best to type it in from memory. Unfortunately, he missed one letter, and his note was directed instead to an elderly pastor’s wife, whose husband had just passed away only the day before. When the grieving widow checked her e-mail, she took one look at the monitor, let out a piercing scream, and fell over in a faint. At the sound, her family rushed into the room and saw this note on the screen: *Dearest Wife, Just got checked in. Everything prepared for your arrival tomorrow. P.S. Sure is hot down here!*”¹

It's a good way to start our conversation today about this next phrase in the Apostles' Creed, “*He descended into hell*”, because usually we tend to be a little uncomfortable talking about the subject, but yet here it is, right in the middle of our Statement of Faith. It is a phrase that, while based in Scripture, was not added to the Creed until maybe as late as the 5th or maybe 8th c.² In addition, it continues to be argued about in regard to its interpretation by well- respected scholars. Some denominations omit it in their versions of the Creed.³ But regardless, it is a phrase that, for us, is very important because it provides great hope and assurance. Let’s look at it more closely.

Probably the interpretation which most directly comes from Scripture is the one wherein Christ is understood to have gone to the place of the dead during the period of time between his death on Friday afternoon and his resurrection on early Sunday morning and preached to the dead who had been there since the beginning of time, those whom the writer of 1 Peter calls, “spirits in prison”. It is important with this interpretation to understand that the place of the dead, also known as Hades in Greek or Sheol in Hebrew, had long been believed as where one’s

¹ Peter Barnes. “*I Believe in Jesus Christ: He Descended Into Hell*” <https://1stpres.com/wp-content/uploads/I-Believe-in-Jesus-Christ-He-Des+cended-Into-Hell-1Pt.-3-11.3.19-1.pdf> (accessed 6-30-23).

²Derek Thomas. “*Descent into Hell*”. <https://www.monergism.com/apostles-creed-today-mp3-series>. (accessed 6-30-23)

³Derek Thomas.

soul made its abode at death. It was a land under the earth. Within this underworld were two realms, one for the righteous (called Paradise) and another for the unrighteous, (often referred to as Gehenna, named so after the valley in Jerusalem where the city's refuse was burned).⁴ No matter whether in Paradise or Gehenna, in Sheol, the souls there awaited Final Day, the day of final judgement and resurrection. You might remember the Biblical stories of the rich man who refused to help the poor beggar named Lazarus. When they both died, the rich man was in Gehenna, from where he looked across a wide chasm and saw Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham...in Paradise! You might also remember Jesus' promise to one of the thieves on the cross "*Today you will be with me in paradise*". The two realms, Gehenna and Paradise were where spirits waited. Peter Barnes says, "*They were "shades" living in the shadowlands.*"

When the Creed says the Jesus "descended into hell", this interpretation considers that Jesus went to Sheol, as did all who died, but there, he offered all the good news of his triumph, his victory over death and their eternal salvation in him. There are wonderful pieces of ancient church artwork which capture what is known as Christ's harrowing of hell, which captures this triumphant event showing Jesus tearing the gates of hell off its hinges. I understand there's even one depicting him pulling Adam & Eve with him as he leaves.⁵

Another interpretation is maybe more "metaphorical". It views "hell" as a spiritual place of suffering and separation from God. Calvin held to this interpretation, that Christ was "made sin" for us. He bore the punishment of divine hostility, of hell, in our place. Reinforcing the substitutionary theory of atonement of which we spoke last week, Calvin said, "*If Christ is said to have descended to the dead, it is nothing to be surprised at, since He bore the death which is to be inflicted by God on us, sinners.*"⁶ Many Calvinists hold to this view.

If I am to hold up the strengths of the metaphor but also bring to the whole interpretation insight from additional scholarship and theories, I will first call you to remember that in addition to suffering enormously and dying on the cross, Jesus knew abandonment. Remember

⁴ Adam Hamilton. *Creed*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press; 2016),70-72.

⁵ Adam Hamilton.

⁶ William Barclay. "*The Apostles' Creed*". (Quoted in

his cry of dereliction, *“My God, my God, why hast thou abandoned me?”* God the Son knew the feeling of being alone, separated from God the Father, not due to the Father’s wrath but due to the need for Jesus to experience the full depth of darkness for us. He knew the pain of forsakenness and abandonment...He knew hell! I will also remind you that Jesus came to earth in order to be in solidarity with the human race. Through his incarnation, God’s intent was to be united with humankind. At-one-ment would attain perfection in Jesus.⁷

Sooooo, (*slowly*) the truth of the matter is this: those with whom Christ, fully human/fully divine, identified in his abandonment on the cross were (and continue to be) the world’s victims. They were and are the sinned against, those poor, weak, downtrodden, those suffering from the same powers that Jesus was resisting...powers that oppress, justify injustice, promote intolerance, greed and ignorance, and condone violence! But also, the world’s evildoers, the sinners, the ones who oppress, commit injustice, intolerance, greed, ignorance and violence were (and continue to be) identified with Christ too, because they suffered in the darkness of their hearts. They were/are separated from God’s will for their happiness. Brothers and sisters, God in Christ entered into solidarity with the totality of the human condition on the cross, the sinners and sinned against, the victims and victimizers, all of us! He suffered, separated and abandoned, identifying with all whom God has forever maintained the unconditional desire for relationship, at-one-ment. *“If he had not,”* Daniel Migliore observes, *“he could not be the Savior of human beings, who know finitude, misery, iniquity, and god forsakenness all too well...We would remain without deliverance and without hope.”*⁸ So, with this perspective, we see Jesus to have died not simply to satisfy God’s honor, or as a perfectly obedient actor, or even as a surrogate, but yet as a sacrifice for us all; yes, he sacrificed himself to show us, to be an example for, the depth of his love.

Now, now, where these two interpretations, the “harrowing of hell” and the more “spiritual/metaphorical” one cross-over is where we find what saying the phrase, *“He descended into hell”* means for us. Quite simply, it means that there is no place that God has

⁷ Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*. A Brief Systematic Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 9.

⁸ Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2004), 175.

not already gone for us and no thing that he has not experienced for us...there is no place, physical or spiritual, that is outside of God's presence. *(Repeat)* At no time...not even for a moment... is anyone or anything left outside of the atoning and saving reach of God! We cannot be too sad, or too bad or too different. We cannot be too distant, desolate, low, or high that we are then excluded from God's desire to be at-one with us. As the psalmist of old so beautifully said, *"If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.... even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you."*

Friends, when John Preston, the great Puritan, lay dying, he was asked if he feared death, now that it was so close. He answered and said, *"No. I shall change my place, but I shall not change my company."*⁹ Friends, I pray that as you say this phrase in the future, it may be a source of amazing comfort and great hope for you. Indeed, may you be like the psalmist and feel that *"such knowledge is too wonderful for you; so high that you cannot attain it."* It is. It is. To God be the glory through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Let us stand and say the Apostles' Creed.

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⁹ Quoted from Peter Barnes. "I Believe in Jesus Christ: He Descended Into Hell" <https://1stpres.com/wp-content/uploads/I-Believe-in-Jesus-Christ-He-Des+cended-Into-Hell-1Pt.-3-11.3.19-1.pdf> (accessed 6-30-23).