

The Sermon - In 10 Sentences or Less
It's Up to You (Week 2) - Jesus "Descended to Hell?":



1) Most of what we know as The Apostles Creed actually started as "The Old Roman Creed," dating back to 125-135 CE (only a few decades removed from the writing of the last New Testament documents).

2) The phrase "descended to Hell" was the result of speculation in late 200s and 300s CE about what Jesus was doing on Holy Saturday, and was formally adopted in 750 CE.

3) "Hell" doesn't mean what we, as 21st-century American Christians, might think: the early Christians were operating with both a Jewish and Greco-Roman perspective, wherein Sheol and Hades were understood to be the land of all the dead, righteous and unrighteous (Jesus Himself gives voice to understanding of the underworld, see Luke 16.19-31 and 23.42-43, "Paradise" being the place in Sheol for the righteous).

4) This phrase functions as a pivot: it points backward to Jesus' death and burial, and forward to His resurrection, ascension, and rule at God's right hand.

5) For the earliest Christians, this phrase expressed the completion of Jesus' death: His body stopped functioning, His body was entombed to begin its decomposition, and He descended to the abode of all the dead.

6) Thus, His descent represents Jesus' lowest point, and it is from this, not merely from a tomb, that God raises Him (in fact, one of Peter's chief ways of explaining the resurrection on Pentecost is that God promised to not leave Him in Sheol, see Acts 2.27-28, which is a citation of Psalm 16).

7) This phrase is also an expression of the early church's overall understanding of Jesus' life, mission, death, and resurrection called Christus Victor (Christ the Victor), in which God sent Him to do battle with the forces of sin, evil, and death that hold humanity hostage, succumb to them on the cross, and then invade their domain ((Hades), and rise again.

8) This Christus Victor perspective is what undergirds so much of the New Testament language of Christ currently ruling as Lord of all, and holding the very keys of death and the grave (see Phil. 2.9-10, 1st Peter 3.22, Revelation 1.17-18).

9) This notion of Jesus having won an ultimate, decisive victory over these fundamental forces and being the current Lord of all was meant to offer comfort, strength, and assurance to the earliest Christians who lived on the margins of the Roman empire, were under the thumb of that empire's cruelty and oppression, and were often persecuted, imprisoned, and killed for their faith.

10) There is direct link between Christus Victor and Christian mission: the victory is already won, and it is now our privilege to be a part of where God through Christ is taking the entire cosmos.

Quotes to Chew On

- On the resurrection as Jesus' release from the underworld:

"In the ancient world, to die meant that one's soul went down to the underworld...and there was no coming back from there. To die and descend was to go into a blackhole of shadowy wandering from which there is no hope of return. And Jesus is the only human to have gone into hell and have emerged from it in one piece. This is unprecedented. This is resurrection!" (Church historian Preston Hill)

- On Christians living in light of Jesus' victory:

We as Christians can now dance among sin, evil, and death the way "children can dance among tamed, toothless lions." (St. Athanasius, 300s CE)

- On the connection between Christ's Lordship and Christian mission:

"The Good Friday and Easter stories come at the end of the four gospels but are not about an "end." They are about a "beginning." They are the beginning of God's new creation and Kingdom. God is now in charge on earth as in heaven.

And that is focused on Jesus who is both King and Lord over all. The sign nailed to the cross was in fact correct. So the call of the gospel is for the church to implement the victory of God in the world through suffering love. We are now invited to belong to the new world God is unveiling in Jesus." (New Testament scholar N. T. Wright)

Resources

A few resources from the PCUSA on Jesus' descent to Hell:

- [Presbyterian Mission Agency Did Jesus really descend into hell?](#)
- [What did Jesus do on Holy Saturday?](#)
- ['He Descended into Hell'](#)