

1 PETER 3:18-20

DID JESUS GO TO HELL?



FIRST BYRON CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH

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INTRODUCTION

"He descended into Hell." How many times have you said this in your life? If you were brought up in churches that regularly recited the Apostle's Creed, then you may have said it hundreds of times. But is it true? **Did Jesus descend into hell?** The answer, as we will see, is "No" and "Yes." "No" in one sense, "Yes" in another sense.

Why does this matter? If what we are confessing is false, then we need to stop confessing it because we are speaking falsehood. If what we are confessing is true, we need to understand in what sense it is true. Otherwise, we are serving God only with our lips and not with our minds and hearts. Also, as we will see, a right understanding of this phrase is vital if we are to rightly know Jesus and a wrong understanding of it has led to serious error that affects the salvation of souls. **So, did Jesus go to hell? Did he descend into hell?** One passage that is key to understanding this phrase is 1 Peter 3:18-20.

BACKGROUND

The context here is the role of suffering in saving souls (8-17). Peter was writing to persecuted Christians who were puzzled about why God would allow suffering in their lives. Peter taught them how suffering for Christ brings souls to Christ as people saw and heard their witness for Christ in the midst of their suffering.

Peter then pointed to how God, in the same way, used Christ's Spirit-supported suffering to bring us to God (18).

Finally he takes them all the way back to Noah to show how, with the help of Christ's Spirit, Noah testified to his generation and though he suffered for it, yet still was used to bring the souls of his family to safety (19-20).



Why do we say, in one sense, no, Christ did not go to hell?



1. NO, JESUS DID NOT GO TO HELL

Most people who interpret this line in the Apostle's Creed as saying Christ went to hell base it largely on this passage. Roman Catholics teach that Jesus went to hell, preached to the Old Testament saints, and liberated them from hell to take them to heaven. Although it may look like this passage is saying that, it isn't, as I hope to show you from Peter's words and Christ's words.

Peter's Words

The Preacher: The preacher is Noah, inspired by Christ's Spirit. Prior to his birth on earth, the eternal Son of God preached through his prophets and his people in the Old Testament. **"[In the spirit Jesus]...went and proclaimed [the truth]...when God's patience waited in the days of Noah" (19)**

The Hearers: The congregation who heard Christ's words through Noah were the people on earth during Noah's time but who at the time of Peter's letter were now "spirits in prison" because they did not repent and believe Christ's words. **"[By the Spirit] he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared" (19-20).** Matthew Henry wrote: **"Because they were dead and disembodied when the apostle speaks of them, therefore he properly calls them spirits now in prison; not that they were in prison when Christ preached to them."**

The Message: The parallels between Peter's and Noah's times are obvious resulting in a similar message. Despite being a tiny righteous minority living among a large wicked majority, like Jesus in his day and Noah in his, we are to faithfully call to repentance and faith by the power of the Spirit, even though few are saved.

Christ's Words

"Between us and you a great chasm has been fixed" (Lk. 16:26). There's no traffic between hell and heaven. No one who is a spirit in hell's prison will ever hear the Gospel and become free in heaven.

"Truly...today you will be with me in paradise" (Lk. 23:43). Jesus and the thief were going to paradise.

"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" (Lk. 23:46). His spirit was going to his Father not hell.

"It is finished" (Jn. 19:30): Jesus's suffering at that point was over not about to begin.

Jesus did not go to hell. At his death, his body was placed in the tomb and his soul went to heaven.

CHANGING OUR STORIES WITH GOD'S STORY

You will not get a second chance. Many have used this passage to suggest that people in hell will get a second chance to hear the Gospel and believe. There are no second chances. There are no do-overs in hell.

You have a chance to witness. Use this passage to motivate evangelism even while suffering for it, because God can use it to save souls from hell. Even if it's only a few saved, it's worth our suffering for that.

WE HAVE ONE CHANCE TO WITNESS
WE HAVE ONE CHANCE TO BELIEVE



So, Jesus did not descend to hell.
So, should we stop saying he did?



2. YES, JESUS DID GO TO HELL

If Jesus did not go to hell in the sense of going there in his body or soul to preach the Gospel to those in hell, in what sense did he go to hell. How can we still say, "He descended into hell?" Here are two ways that Reformed Churches have understood this phrase to be true.

Jesus went to the grave

Westminster Larger Catechism 50. Wherein consisted Christ's humiliation after his death?

A: "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."

The Greek and Hebrew words for hell can be interpreted as "place of the dead" or "the grave." It also fits into the creed's linear chronology: (1) "Crucified, dead and buried," (2) "descended into hell," (3) "on the third day he rose from the dead." However, if "descended into hell" means "buried," this ends up saying "he was buried" twice."

Those who support this view still insist that Christ's suffering was over when he died, that being in the grave was part of his shame but not part of his suffering. It appeared that he had lost and death won.

Hell came to Jesus

Heidelberg Catechism 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.

Those who take this view see the phrase not as part of a linear chronology, but as a summary of all of the preceding lines about Christ's suffering. Calvin framed it as one of two ways the cross can be viewed. "The creed sets forth what Christ suffered in the sight of men [suffered...crucified, dead, buried], and then speaks of that invisible and incomprehensible judgment he underwent in the sight of God [he descended into hell]."

CHANGING OUR STORIES WITH GOD'S STORY

Jesus suffered hell so you would not have to. Although his suffering was for only a few hours, yet because he was sinless and divine, his suffering was great enough and valuable enough to free us from suffering hell.

Let's worship with all our minds. We must worship intelligently not ritualistically. As Michael Horton said, "His hell gained our heaven; his curse secured our blessing; his incalculable grief brought us immeasurable joy." Therefore, let us say it with conviction and with joy: "He descended into hell."

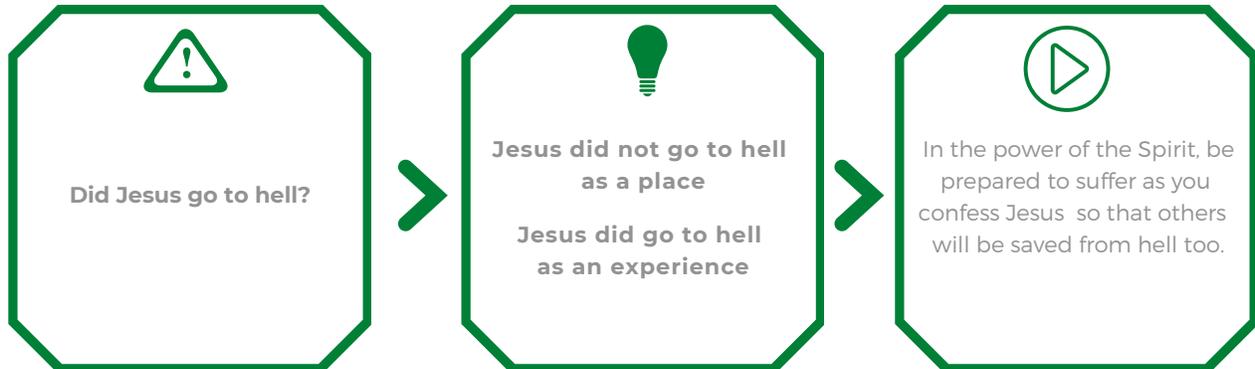
JESUS SUFFERED ALL HELL
SO WE WOULD SUFFER NO HELL.



Hear God's Story > Change your story > Tell the story > Change others' stories



SUMMARY



THE NEXT CHAPTER

Confess your faith. It's so important not just to tell the truth but to understand it with our minds and embrace it with our hearts. This phrase of the Apostle's Creed should be received with joy as it prevents it being said of us: "He/she descended into hell."

Suffer for your faith. We need the Holy Spirit. It's hard to tell people about hell. It's even harder when we suffer for telling people what they need to hear about salvation from hell. Without the Holy Spirit, we will never be able to suffer for confessing our faith.

Prayer: My wonderful Savior, give me your Spirit so that I can endure suffering to tell others about your great salvation so that others can escape hell too. Amen.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What did you previously think this phrase in the Apostle's Creed meant?
2. What other Scripture proofs can you think of to prove that Jesus did not go to hell?
3. How have you been helped by the Spirit when suffering for confessing your faith?
4. Does "descended into hell" mean "Jesus went to the grave" or "hell came to Jesus"?
5. Why is it so important to understand this phrase rightly?
6. How will understanding this better help you love Jesus better?

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