

"HE DESCENDED INTO HELL"

Jerry Johnson

This statement of our Creed can be very puzzling at first glance and deserves a deeper explanation. Both the Sacred Scriptures and the Creed affirm that Jesus "rose from the *dead*". He did, in fact, die, humanly speaking. And, as we will each experience upon our death, his soul separated from his lifeless human body. Christ's soul, united to his divine person, then entered another realm. This "hell", *Sheol* in Hebrew or *Hades* in Greek, that Christ descended to, was so called because all who entered there were deprived of the vision of God. Remember, at this point in time, the gates of heaven were not yet opened. Both the righteous and the damned entered this "abode of the dead" at the time of their death. However, as we know from the Scriptural story of Lazarus and the Rich Man, (Luke 16:19-31) there was a separation between the two groups. One in which the damned could still see the peace of the righteous in Abraham's bosom, but could not cross that chasm that prevented their escape from eternal damnation. So, why would Jesus, the eternal Son of God, descend to this abode of the dead, this "hell"? The Catechism, par. 632, tells us that "he

descended there as Savior, proclaiming the Good News to the spirits imprisoned there". Paragraph 633 goes on to tell us "Jesus did not descend into hell to deliver the damned, nor to destroy the hell of damnation, but to free the just that had gone before him." This was the fulfillment of the Gospel message. Jesus died to save both the righteous who had gone before him and those who would come after him. He destroyed the power of death and opened the gates to eternal life with the Father in heaven. The just would no longer be deprived of the vision of God, but would bask in his glory. This was the moment they had been waiting for. An experience beyond our imagination! The fulfillment and epitome of their existence. But what does this mean for us? We too are waiting, amid the pain and struggles of this life, for Christ to descend into our hearts and lives. To redeem and to purify, to destroy the death of our sinfulness and lift us into his glorious life. As baptized children of the Father, we may experience a foretaste of the eternal beatitude even now, especially through the power of the Eucharist. But we continue to await the fulfillment and epitome of our own existence; when we are fully cleansed and purified and experience God face to face. In this world we are in

labor, as is all of creation, (Romans 8:22,23) but we are being transformed from "glory to glory". (2 Cor 3:18) It is a process that may extend even beyond our physical life here on earth in the realm of Purgatory. We await, in joyful hope, for that resurrection that brings us into the eternal beatitude that is total union with Christ. One in him as he is one with the

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Father. (John 17:21-23) It is the hope that we cling to, that we strive for, and that strengthens us as we continue to grow in God's grace. It is the purpose and reason for our existence. It truly gives meaning to our lives. May we come to understand and live in that meaning a little more each day. May we continue to grow in our faith by seeking first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness (Matt 6:33) and offering him lives of prayer and obedience. Lord Jesus Christ, son of the living God, have mercy on us and raise us up from death to eternal life with you!

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SACRED SCRIPTURE



“...Jesus, whom you delivered up and denied,... whom God raised from the dead.” (Acts 3:13-15)

“For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit; in which he went and preached to the spirits in prison...” (1 Pet 3:18,19)

“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.” (1 Pet 4:6)

“When the poor man died, he was carried away by angels to the bosom of Abraham. The rich man

also died and was buried, and from the netherworld, where he was in torment, he raised his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he cried out, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me. Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am suffering torment in these flames.' Abraham replied, 'My child, remember that you received what was good during your lifetime while Lazarus likewise received what was bad; but now he is comforted here, whereas you are tormented. Moreover, between us and you a great chasm is established to prevent anyone from crossing who might wish to go from our side to yours or from your side to ours.'”

(Luke 16:22-26)

“We know that all creation is

groaning in labor pains even until now; and not only that, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, we also groan within ourselves as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.” (Rom 8:22,23)

“All of us, gazing with unveiled face on the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, as from the Lord who is the Spirit.”

(2 Cor 3:18)

“ And I have given them the glory you gave me, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may be brought to perfection as one, that the world may know that you sent me, and that you loved them even as you loved me.” (John 17:22,23)

SACRED TRADITION

“636 By the expression “He descended into hell,” the Apostles' Creed confesses that Jesus did really die and through his death for us conquered death and the devil “who has the power of death” (Heb 2:14). (CCC)

637 In his human soul united to his divine person, the dead Christ went down to the realm of the dead. He opened heaven's gates for the just who had gone before him. (CCC)

Thoughtful Questions

What are you awaiting in your life, what do you hope for?
Is your vision limited to the here and now or do you ponder the everlasting?