

# Jot & Tittle

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## **Did Jesus Descend into Hell?**

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The Apostles' Creed, though not written by the New Testament apostles, was an expression of basic Christian beliefs developed early in the church's history. Its earliest expression, dating to about A.D. 340, did not include any statement regarding Jesus' supposed descent into hell.<sup>1</sup> However, by A.D. 460 the expanded form of the Apostles' Creed included the statement, "He descended into hell."<sup>2</sup> But what does this phrase mean?

Some interpreters believe that, between His death on the cross and His resurrection on Easter morning, Jesus suffered further torment in hell as payment for sin. However, from the cross Jesus declared, "It is finished" (John 19:30). Since Jesus declared His sacrificial work for sins to be completed on the cross, it is unlikely that He suffered further torment in hell. Other interpreters see the phrase in the Apostles' Creed as referring to Jesus' proclaiming to the souls in hell His victory over sin. It was at this time that Jesus, according to this interpretation, would have released Old Testament believers from captivity in sheol (a compartment in hell) and taken them to heaven. While this interpretation is more plausible, finding support in several Bible passages, it seems preferable to deny that Jesus ever descended into hell. An evaluation of the key Bible references will help answer the question, "Did Jesus descend into hell?"

## ***John 20:17 and Jesus' Command, "Do not touch me."***

After Jesus' resurrection He appeared first to Mary Magdalene. Jesus told Mary, "Touch me not, for I am not yet ascended to my Father" (John 20:17, KJV). This statement may imply that Jesus had not gone to heaven during the time between His death and resurrection. "For if we ask why, a week later, St. Thomas is expressly invited at 20:27 to do that which at 20:17 was forbidden to Mary, the answer must be that it is because the Lord's ascent to the Father has meantime taken place . . ." <sup>3</sup> However, John does not use the same word for "touch" in John 20:27 that he did in 20:17. The word for "touch" in 20:17 means to hold onto or cling to. Jesus' statement can be translated, "Do not hold on to me" (NIV). "He was not refusing to be touched but was making clear that she did not need to detain him, for he had not yet ascended to the Father."<sup>4</sup> This might imply that Jesus was telling Mary that He must eventually return to the Father and would not remain long on earth in His physical presence. His ascent to heaven, then, would take place in about 40 days as described in Acts 1:9. Therefore, Jesus' ascent described in John 20:17 refers to His permanent ascent to be with the Father and does not imply that Jesus had spent the time between His death and resurrection in hell.

## ***Ephesians 4:9 and the "Lower Parts of the Earth"***

According to Ephesians 4:9, Jesus "descended first into the lower parts of the earth" (KJV). Does this mean that Jesus descended into hell after His crucifixion? This is a possible interpretation.<sup>5</sup> However, in this passage Paul is comparing Jesus' ascension and His descent. Jesus ascended from earth to heaven. Therefore, it seems preferable to see Jesus' descent as a descent from heaven to earth. This descent took place at His incarnation. Kent supports this interpretation, saying, "Most modern interpreters explain 'of the earth' as appositional, and explain the passage as referring to the incarnation in which Christ came from heaven to earth, and then later ascended from earth to heaven. By this interpretation, 'lower parts' may refer to the lowly, humiliating aspects of His earthly career."<sup>6</sup> The New International Version

reflects this interpretation in its translation, “What does ‘he ascended’ mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions?” Therefore, it is not necessary to see this passage as supporting the idea that Jesus descended into hell after His death.

### ***1 Peter 3:19-20 and Jesus’ Preaching to the “Spirits in Prison”***

According to 1 Peter 3:19-20, after Jesus died He was “made alive by the Spirit through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison” (NIV). These spirits in prison, according to the text, “disobeyed long ago” in the days of Noah. Does this passage prove that Jesus descended into hell to proclaim victory to those who had rebelled in ancient times? Hoyt describes this view:

While in Sheol-Hades Christ made a proclamation. On the one hand, it took the nature of an authoritative pronouncement to the spirits in prison (I Peter 3:18-19, ASV). On the other hand it was an announcement of good news (I Peter 4:6, ASV). To the wicked in lowest Sheol it was a message of a finished redemption and a harbinger of “release to the captives” (Luke 4:18, ASV). In no sense did this message hold out a second chance to anyone.<sup>7</sup>

First Peter 3:19-20 presents several interpretive difficulties. But it is sufficient to demonstrate that this passage does not necessarily refer to a descent of Jesus into hell after His death. One interpretation that denies that Jesus descended into hell says that Jesus proclaimed judgment to the people of Noah’s day through Noah’s preaching. “The ‘spirits in prison’ were people living in the days of Noah, when he built the ark. . . . It is estimated that Noah spent over one hundred years constructing the ark, and every nail he drove into the ark should have warned the men living in that time of judgment to come.”<sup>8</sup> A preferable interpretation that denies Jesus’ descent into hell says that Jesus proclaimed to fallen angels His victory and their judgment. “The best explanation is that the ‘spirits’ (*pneumata*) are fallen angels . . . . Jesus, then, in his resurrection ‘goes’ to the place of angelic confinement. Since this is another realm, we cannot locate it spatially. However, there does not seem to be good evidence for

seeing here a ‘descent into hell.’”<sup>9</sup> It is also possible to view Jesus’ proclamation to these angelic spirits as having taken place through the Holy Spirit at the time of their confinement in the days of Noah. What is certain is that this passage does not demand that Jesus descended into hell.

### ***Conclusion***

Did Jesus descend into hell? There is no solid evidence in the Bible that Jesus descended into hell during the time between His death and resurrection. Instead, it seems best to understand that Jesus, upon His death, went immediately into the presence and fellowship of God the Father in heaven to await His resurrection and bodily ascension. In fact, Luke 23:46 seems conclusive on this issue. As Jesus gave up His life on the cross, He cried out, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (NIV).

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<sup>1</sup> Bettenson, Henry. *Documents of the Christian Church*. Second Edition. London: Oxford University Press, 1963, pp. 23-24.

<sup>2</sup> Enns, Paul. *The Moody Handbook of Theology*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1989, p. 418.

<sup>3</sup> Lightfoot, R. H. *St. John’s Gospel: A Commentary*. London: Oxford University Press, 1957, p. 331

<sup>4</sup> Tenney, Merrill C. “The Gospel of John” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 9. Edited by Frank E. Gaebelein. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981, p. 191.

<sup>5</sup> Barry, Alfred. “Ephesians” in *Ellicott’s Commentary on the Whole Bible*. Vol. 8. Edited by Charles John Ellicott. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d., p. 39.

<sup>6</sup> Kent, Homer A., Jr. *Ephesians: The Glory of the Church*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1971, p. 70.

<sup>7</sup> Hoyt, Herman A. *The End Times*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1969, p. 45.

<sup>8</sup> Barbieri, Louis A. *First and Second Peter*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1977, p. 70.

<sup>9</sup> Blum, Edwin A. “1 Peter” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 12. Edited by Frank E. Gaebelein. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981, p. 242.

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