

# He descended into hell

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 12 September 2021

Preacher: Benjamin Wilks

[ 0 : 0 0 ]     some things that we believe some theological ideas some of them are unequivocally abundantly clear some are kind of reiterated in no uncertain terms in a number of different places through God's word sometimes you can point to a chapter and verse and say look here it is why do we believe Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary because it says so right there in the gospel accounts why do we believe God made the universe it's there in the very first verse of the Bible it's not complicated to establish these things but some theological ideas are more complex than that sometimes you can't point to a single verse and say look here it is the Trinity is the classic example right that the word Trinity isn't there in the Bible you can't point to a single verse and say look it has to be like this because because there it is in one sentence no and yet if you read the Bible responsibly the conclusion of one God in three persons is absolutely inescapable now the idea that we're considering today probably isn't so vital to our understanding as the doctrine of the Trinity but the assertion that Jesus Christ descended into hell is I want to establish for you this morning not only scriptural but also significant so I want to show you not just why you should be comfortable declaring this as part of the Apostles Creed but also why this understanding that Jesus descended to the dead should be a comfort to you in your faith so so we're returning to that series working through the Apostles Creed and as we do that let me remind you of the title I gave the series all the way back in October 2019 ancient truths for God's people today this is what God's people have believed since ancient times this is what the church of Jesus Christ has confessed down through the ages and this is what we should believe today because it is true and because it is good for us to know these things so I warned you last week that this is by far the most controversial line in the creed and so I do have to ask you to bear with me today okay this is going to be a little bit fiddlier than some sermons possibly a little bit more academic but I am trying my best to be accessible and relevant okay and so you may need to focus and think carefully but I hope and pray that your diligence and mine will be repaid so let me read you the creed through so we have the context of the phrase we're looking at today

I believe in God the Father Almighty creator of heaven and earth and in Jesus Christ his only son our Lord who was conceived by the Holy Spirit born of the Virgin Mary suffered under Pontius Pilate was crucified died and was buried he descended into hell on the third day he rose again from the dead he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the father and he will come again to judge the living and the dead I believe in the Holy Spirit the Holy Catholic Church the communion of saints the forgiveness of sins the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting amen he descended into hell we're going to frame our consideration this morning under a few different headings first he descended to where second what did he there and third why do we care in asking he descended to where we're going to need to do a little bit of linguistics and a little bit of history to kind of define our terms and clarify what is and isn't being said and then with that backdrop we turn to specific passages of scripture looking at those confusing lines from

Peter's letter that we read last week but also several other passages and I want to justify that not only that Jesus did descend but also consider why for what purpose he went what did he there and then we'll ask what difference this makes to you and to me hopefully there will be some of that as we go through but we'll also go there explicitly at the end that's my plan he descended into hell and first we ask well well where what do we mean by that if we're going to understand what the creed intends to convey by this line if we're going to understand the language of scripture then we need to have in our heads a biblical cosmology by which we mean how does the bible understand the universe to exist exist not so much on a kind of physical scientific level but on a on a conceptual a metaphorical level so we use spatial terms but the point of what we're looking at now is not so much physical but analogical these are kind of analogies of things that really exist but aren't kind of physically structured in this way so here is the big picture up the top of the diagram there you've got heaven god's dwelling place that's above the upper waters the upper waters that's kind of where the rain and the snow and so on come from and those are separated by this firmament a sort of dome that separates the upper waters from the sky sky also known as the firmament of heaven so heaven can refer to either the sky or to the place where god dwells up above that then underneath the sky obviously under that is the earth then under the earth well the earth is on pillars that support it above the great deep the waters underneath the earth those waters sometimes gush up to form the springs and the seas and the oceans so you have water above and water beneath but then crucial to our understanding today it is that black area in kind of the middle of the earth that's labeled sheol so the language of descent in the creed it comes from this conceptual model where sheol is under the earth at the earth where you and i live and then conceptually below that sheol this is the same as us talking about jesus coming down to earth from heaven well we don't think that it's particularly a physical description this is a concept expressed in spatial language and so too uh descending into sheol so we've got descended so far so good but then we've got this this on the diagram that says sheol and the creed i read a few minutes ago says hell and you might well have heard versions of it that say uh to the dead and while we're at it what about hades gehenna tartarus paradise how do all these places relate to one another and the difficulty here is that language isn't always as precise as my engineering brain wishes it was we're dealing actually not just with complicated words in one language we've got four different languages going on we've got hebrew we've got greek we've got latin and we've got english we have to grapple with all of these that kind of translate one another in different overlapping ways and this produces confusion and misunderstandings so back up to this old testament understanding this cosmology that they understood you have this place called sheol that's under the earth and sheol is where all dead people go okay everyone who dies descends to sheol sheol is not not just a place of punishment everyone goes to sheol so sheol is morally neutral but then this this generic place of the dead

sheol it has compartments within it how do we know it has compartments maybe you remember a few months back the account of the rich man and lazarus luke chapter 16 both the rich man and lazarus die lazarus we're told is taken to abraham's side abraham's bosom and the rich man is taken to hades where he's in torment but then within that account of the rich man and lazarus there's communication between the two the rich man speaks to abraham how does he do that well because they're both there in sheol both in this generic place of the dead hades and abraham's bosom are kind of two separate compartments within one place you can't travel from one to the other from one to the other we're told there's a chasm fixed between them but you can communicate from one to the other but it gets more confusing beyond this because we've got all these other words to kind of map on as well so abraham's bosom also frequently called paradise hades where we're told the rich man goes that's the greek word hades but it's also known as gehenna which we would typically translate hell and then in hebrew this same compartment hades it's also often called sheol so the place of the dead as a whole hebrew sheol and the place of torment within it also sheol and the same thing happens in greek hades can be a reference to this place of the unrighteous dead or hades can refer to the place of all the dead and the same in latin which is the language that the earliest records of the creed are written in the same word can be used either for the place of the dead as a whole or a reference to the place of torment within it so you can imagine that by the time all of this gets translated into english it is a little bit confusing and it's probably even worse because in modern english today you and i we pretty much use the word hell exclusively to refer to a place of torment right that's what you think of when you hear the word hell but when the creed was being first translated hell was also used to refer to this general place of all of the dead so our objective when we work our way through the creed is to understand what faith the church has declared throughout her history to understand what the people who wrote this down as a creed meant to say what they thought we ought to believe and if we don't understand what the language they used means then we end up quite confused don't we so please do not think do not think that when the creed was written it was intended to say that jesus went to be punished or tormented after he died upon the cross that is never what descended into hell was meant to mean it didn't mean that in the original latin it didn't mean that when they used the word hell to translate it into english and we can be very clear on this we know that jesus did not go to be punished how do we know this because on the cross jesus said it is finished possibly the most significant declaration in all of human history it is finished the price was paid once for all upon the cross there was not further debt to be paid after that point no further price no post-mortem punishment needed on the cross jesus said it is finished so it can't be post-mortem punishment in hell it is unequivocally wrong to say that jesus descended to a place of torment or to say that anything needed to be added to jesus work upon the cross

now that recognition that we can't be saying jesus went to be punished after his death the great reformer john calvin looked at that and said well therefore when the creed says descended into hell the intent must be not to refer to sufferings of christ after death but rather sufferings upon the cross that as it were the full force of suffering that you or i would rightly experience in hell that is experienced in hell by sinners after their death that that is instead experienced by christ prior to his death upon the cross that as it were the torments of hell are kind of brought earlier than they would normally be that's what calvin took this line in the creed to mean and you can see how that would be plausible but this is essentially a new interpretation from calvin there isn't any evidence of people understanding this line in the creed that way until calvin comes up with it and that should give a significant pause for thought and unfortunately this seems to arise ultimately from calvin misunderstanding what was meant when the creed was first written because hell or inferno in the latin that calvin was probably reading that doesn't always mean torment sometimes it just means the place for all the dead people so a place of torment is not what hell was being understood to mean when the creed was written so calvin was solving the wrong problem when he said we've got to move those sufferings earlier language the other bit of history that it's helpful to be aware of as well as calvin and his understanding the other thing to be aware of is that this this line he descended into hell it hasn't been universally part of the creed there's a few different kind of variations within what we call the apostles creed and they go back right into the very early history of christianity most of the earliest versions that we have most of them include the line and was buried but not the line descended into hell a few early versions have the latter have he descended into hell but don't have and was buried and it's only kind of a little bit later on in the history of the creed being kind of copied and used that we find both lines being included now the fact that it's a later addition leads some to conclude well we should get rid of it then it wasn't what was part of originally intended but ultimately our criterion for assessing what we should or shouldn't declare to be our faith it's not just history is it our criterion is does this match up with the bible is this a valid account of what the bible says to us and we will turn to that very shortly but on history let me say even on historical grounds i don't think the variation means we should do away with it because we have to ask why did this variation come about why do you have versions with he was buried versions with he descended into hell and then versions with both well it seems to come about because as one scholar puts it the reason for the elasticity of wording is that a burial implies a descent and a descent presupposes a burial you can't have one without the other either way round it didn't get included in the first place because you don't need to say both that he was buried and that he descended to the place of the dead because if one is true the other obviously is but it gets included in later versions of the creed and should be included today precisely because we no longer assume that one is inherently implied by the other

[ 16 : 05 ] because our cosmology isn't the same as Hebrew cosmology that was understood when the creed was first framed so it does us good to include it to understand that both things are happening even though it wasn't originally required one last point on language i've used slightly interchangeably in my phrasing of the creed he descended into hell or he descended to the dead and as i say both versions get used in churches so which ought we to say?

well the language of descended into hell has the advantage of historical connection that this phrasing goes back centuries the same language has been used down through the years and if we understand by hell not torment but the general place of the dead then the wording of hell doesn't need to trouble us however we don't often use the word hell that way in English today and up to I know six months or so ago when I started looking into this up till then I reckon I would have followed Calvin's understanding that hell has to mean torment because that's what the word means and it can't be after death so it has to be before death but that is not what this word is supposed to mean as we'll see more fully when we turn to the Bible so folks if you're in another church or this church and they say to you let's recite descended into hell then you can do that without qualms you don't need to be worried about saying that it is legitimate to say he descended into hell but for my money we'd be better off saying he descended to the dead because it's clearer in modern English what we are actually intending to say so I've changed my mind since I started this series and thought well let's put on the screen the version that says he descended into hell so I think on balance he descended to the dead is a better phrasing but that part at least I hold quite lightly you can say hell if you like language he descended to where onwards the second section the title what did he there it gets that title because I like the rhyming but I don't want to just talk about what he was actually doing

I want to cover as well kind of our basis for believing that it happened at all does the Bible teach this because so far all the Bible has shown us is he did not go to a place of torment if we want to make the positive case that he descended to the dead we've got a little bit more work to do now I said at the start this doesn't stand or fall on a single verse or passage this fits with the fabric of all of Scripture and we call that a theology of good and necessary consequence not what's directly immediately stated in Scripture but what's deduced from Scripture by good and necessary consequence we have to come to this conclusion because it's the only thing that makes sense of all of the things that the Bible say when you put them together that's how we get the doctrine of the Trinity and it's how we get this understanding that he descended to the dead so we're going to visit a few different places and see what they have to say come first to Matthew chapter 12 grab it in your Bibles if you want or it's on the screen

Matthew chapter 12 from verse 38 some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to Jesus teacher we want to see a sign from you he answered a wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign but none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah for as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish so the son of man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth the men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it for they repented at the preaching of Jonah and now something greater than Jonah is here now on a surface level this is fairly straightforward isn't it just as Jonah metaphorically died and then was vomited back onto dry land so too Jesus will die and will rise again much more fully a prophecy of death and resurrection so far so good but it's not the down and up again that Jesus actually highlights is it he points rather to the three days and the three nights in the belly of the fish

Jonah was there three days and three nights in the belly of the huge fish so the son of man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth Jesus will be in the heart of the earth says verse 40 now Jonah in chapter 2 Jonah praised God for deliverance deliverance from where?

[ 21 : 01 ] Jonah chapter 2 verse 2 he cried from deep in the realm of the dead or in a more literal translation from deep in the belly of Sheol Jonah in that fish is at least conceptually in the place of the dead the belly of the fish is in his mind at least akin to Sheol the heart of the sea verse 3 of Jonah 2 and the pit verse 6 these are also frequently references to the place of the dead metaphors used for it throughout the Old Testament so in Jonah's mind he has descended to the dead and Jesus compares the time frames of the two experiences but he does much more than just compare the timing as you might imagine in trying to prepare for this sermon I have read quite a few different books and chapters and articles by far the most helpful of them comes from a guy called Matthew Emerson it's called an evangelical theology of Holy Saturday and he says

Jesus does not merely compare the time frame of his death to the time frame of Jonah's time in the fish nor is the comparison merely between Jonah's prophetic ministry and that of Jesus rather Jesus compares himself to Jonah because what happens to them the former literally and the latter figuratively is the same their experience is the same Jonah's body is in the fish the grave while his soul metaphorically is in Sheol Jesus' body is in the heart of the earth the grave whilst his soul literally is in the place of the dead so Jesus himself said in Matthew chapter 12 that the place of the dead the heart of the earth that that was where he was going to go and he told them how long he'd be there that is our first piece of data let's take a look next at Revelation Revelation chapter 1 Jesus said to John I am the living one

I was dead and now look I am alive forever and ever and I hold the keys of death and Hades Jesus says he has the keys of death and Hades Hades remember synonymous with Sheol the place of the dead how do you suppose Jesus got those keys?

well he went and took them off their owners Jesus has defeated death and Hades personified Jesus is victorious Jesus went on to death's own territory and defeated him man's last great enemy he has been defeated it's demonstrated by the resurrection from the dead Christ now becomes king even over the realm where he was previously imprisoned Jesus has the authority in that realm in the realm of the dead and Jesus' authority there means you and I don't need to fear to go there there's nowhere that Christ is not king that's what Paul writes to the Philippians in chapter 2 God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow every knee where?

in heaven on earth and under the earth Jesus has gone and defeated death third point let's consider the nature of paradise remember paradise another way to refer to the place of the righteous dead one of these compartments within Sheol one word for this is paradise Abraham's bosom paradise this is where Lazarus went and on the cross to a dying thief who throws himself on his mercy Jesus said today you will be with me in paradise now again the fact that they're talking about going to paradise strongly counters any suggestion that Jesus went to be punished but when anyone listening to Jesus saying that when the thief heard Jesus saying that what's in his mind as the definition of paradise is this compartment within the place of the dead that's what they all assume Jesus is talking about and maybe you and I don't immediately make the connection that paradise is that place in Sheol but that's what they all understood that's where the two of them went as they died but Jesus did more than go to paradise he didn't just go there and hang out for a few days no he transformed and renewed it because the next time paradise is used in the New Testament it comes in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians

[ 25 : 48 ] Paul says I know a man in Christ who 14 years ago was caught up to the third heaven up at the top of our cosmology whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know God knows and I know that this man whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know but God knows was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things things that no one is permitted to tell do you see that here writing to the Corinthians Paul equates paradise and the third heaven but the third heaven is up at the top where God lives and paradise is down in Sheol so how are these places the same well because even paradise is transformed is made a greater paradise by the presence of Jesus so Emerson again he says the presence of Jesus in paradise changes its entire constitution rather than being a place where the righteous said await the coming of Israel's promised Messiah the Christ is now in their midst this change in paradise its constitution from one of messianic expectation back in the Old Testament days longing for the Messiah from that to one of Christological reality here he is and this is mirrored in the New Testament by a change in spatial description from paradise to the third heaven so the description changes not because it's physically moved after all these are spiritual realities the description changes because the nature of it has changed this still isn't yet the new heavens and the new earth that we're ultimately longing for but still because of the presence of Jesus this place of paradise is already greater than it once was it's no longer full of the righteous dead waiting for the Messiah but now a place where the resurrected and ascended Messiah dwells with his people that's the reality of paradise right now they still wait but with the resurrected second Adam the first fruits of their own coming resurrection there in their midst so this is the perfecting of the Old Testament saints to which Hebrews 11 and 12 refer that perfecting of them is achieved by Christ's perfect sacrifice perfecting those who are being made holy bringing them to heaven because he himself is in heaven last passage to look at 1 Peter chapter 3 18 to 22 we read it last week let's go to it again because it's you know we need to have it straight in our heads 1 Peter 3 verse 18 for Christ also suffered once for sins the righteous for the unrighteous to bring you to God he was put to death in the body but made alive in the spirit after being made alive he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built in it only a few people eight in all were saved through water and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience towards God it saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand with angels authorities and powers in submission to him now we have an immediate problem to clear up in these verses because verse 19 looks like this is completely unconnected to what I've been talking about doesn't it because verse 19 begins after being made alive so what does this have to do with Jesus having three days among the dead well unfortunately the Bible translators in their very laudable desire to be clear unfortunately in this case

I think they have over translated slightly the Greek words that become here after being made alive are more literally a kind of very generic non-specific in which now you can see what they're going for in how they come to this translation to link that in which to the being made alive of the previous verse it's a defensible translation it makes sense it's understandable and as I've said you don't need to you know panic that all of this that we've built kind of hangs on these two words that I'm telling you should be translated differently because it's not just this verse and we don't need to panic about our Bible translations this is a minor point of a slight translation difference but I don't think after being made alive is what Peter meant when he wrote in which because another possible sense of in which would be during which time and which of these opinions make sense depends entirely on what you think is going on in the rest of these verses and what's going on here has to fit with the rest of what Peter is trying to say why does Peter write this in the first place because he doesn't write it in order to establish a doctrine of Jesus descending to the dead no he writes it remember what we were looking at in the previous verses last week he writes it to say you don't need to fear threats you don't need to fear suffering he writes it to say be prepared to answer even those who speak maliciously about you what we're learning about

Jesus here is supposed to encourage you in the face of suffering and threats so by this point it is no surprise I'm sure to recognize that held together with the rest of the New Testament I think this is a reference to Jesus descent to the dead after his crucifixion before his resurrection during which time and this tells us at least some of what Jesus was doing in that time Peter says he went and made a proclamation to the imprisoned spirits so Jesus is there in Hades in the place of the dead and he's addressing the spirits therein and remember we said you can communicate between these different compartments you can't communicate from Sheol up to the earth but you can communicate within Sheol so whilst Jesus was in paradise in the good compartment of Sheol he is more than capable of addressing the whole realm of the dead what did he say to them well the NIV says he made proclamation this is not not preaching in the sense of offering a route to salvation

Peter doesn't use the word that always means that he uses another word which sometimes does mean preaching that we would recognize as a sermon does sometimes mean offering good news but also often means making a proclamation just like the NIV and the ESV translate it so Jesus is not offering salvation to anyone in the place of the dead if you've been confused by that before maybe you've read a translation that puts preach there some of the older ones do or you've heard wacky sermons on the God channel that talk about opportunities on the evidence of this well that kind of preaching isn't what's going on here no Jesus goes and he makes proclamation he proclaims his victory Jesus goes and proclaims his victory over the spirits in prison Jesus is on a victory lap as it were he begins under the earth he'll be raised to life on the earth and then he'll ascend up into heaven and in each of these three contexts he proclaims his victory he has won the evil powers are defeated the imprisoned spirits say well this could be disobedient humans in Hades since the days of

[ 33 : 37 ] Noah to whom God announces their judgment in the light of his victory more likely these are imprisoned wicked spiritual beings fallen angels also imprisoned within this same place of the dead a third compartment actually called Tartarus Jesus Jesus declares his victory over the powers of darkness and therein we come to point three why do we care about this because his descent to the place of the dead is evidence of Jesus victory he goes down but this is part of his exaltation not part of his humiliation salvation Jesus goes and says sin has been paid for Jesus goes and says death and Hades have no power over sin he has conquered over death he has triumphed hallelujah he has triumphed my friends Christ's descent to the place of the dead when that descent is seen in the light of his resurrection from death it is evidence of his victory



Colossians 2 having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness which stood against us and condemned us he has taken it away nailing it to the cross and having disarmed the powers and authorities he made a public spectacle of them triumphing over them by the cross the cross is victory and we know it is victory because he descends to and rises from the dead so my friends fear not for death has been defeated and it's finished finished in every way and that's why Peter talks about Christ's descent here the reference is a little bit obscure to you and to me presumably the first people he was writing to understood more readily but he talks about it here to say stand firm in the face of suffering because the end result of Jesus suffering was victory and you too will ultimately participate in that victory that's the first reason to care and then the second comfort from this with which I will end second comfort

Jesus died now that means as Jim Packer puts it we can face death knowing that when death comes we shall we shall not find ourselves alone he has been there before us and he will see us through longer term we look to the resurrection to the new heavens and the new earth but even now we face death knowing Christ has experienced it he didn't go straight from the cross to glory bypassing much of what you and I will experience no he experienced true death and so when our eyes close in death we know that though I walk through the darkest valley I will fear no evil for you are with me your rod and your staff they comfort me you prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies victory over the death and Hades you anoint my head with oil my cup overflows surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the

Lord forever let's pray Lord Jesus thank you that you have gone before us that you have experienced the death that we will experience and you have transformed that experience by making paradise greater still a place where we will be with you in the presence of the risen and ascended Lord Jesus thank you that you have won the victory that we need not fear the power of death that Hades has no authority you hold the keys what a victory you have won what confidence we may have impress this upon our hearts we pray as we recognize that Jesus Christ descended to the dead thank you

Lord Jesus that you went amen