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Sunday, February 1, 2015

Did Jesus Really Go To Hell?

I Peter 3:18-20; I Peter 4:5-6

January 25, 2015

"I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth. And in Jesus Christ his only Son, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried. He descended into hell...."

He descended into hell.

Have you ever thought about that statement from The Apostle's Creed? Whenever I say it, it takes my breath away. And in the back of my head, I think: Where did this come from? Why is it here? Did Jesus really go to hell?

I am teaching a Confirmation class. The curriculum is based on questions that youth ask, such as: Is the Bible true? Why does the Bible contradict itself at times? Can it be proven that God exists? Am I really supposed to believe Mary was a virgin? Do cremated people go to heaven?

By the way, I've been so enamored with this confirmation curriculum that I am toying with the idea of doing this class with adults. Don't you want to know the answer to some of these questions?

Two weeks ago, the question was this: Why did Jesus go to hell? I liked what we learned so much that I decided to share our lesson with you.

As I do, perhaps we need to take a step back and ask this question first: Did Jesus really go to hell? And taking a step back even further: Is there a hell? And, really, does it matter?

Let's take a look at the scripture passages where the idea that Jesus "descended into hell" comes from and address these questions.

Before we read let us pray: Holy Spirit, bravely open our hearts to what you will say to us this day. Change us because we have been together in your presence. Allow the words of your Scriptures to fill us and move us. We don't want to miss anything. Amen.

Read Scriptures.

The first question: Is there really a hell? There are various views on hell – from a literal, physical place for the damned to live for eternity to the view that hell is a state of being completely separated from God. So, a very brief study on hell.

In the OT, there is no mention of hell, but there is the mention of a place called Sheol. It is the place of the dead where there is no praise. In the NT, hell is mentioned 12 times mostly by Jesus. Jesus used the word “Gehenna.” The “ge” that begins this word means valley. The “henna” refers to Hinnom – the valley of Hinnom, which was the city dump outside of Jerusalem. It was the place where people tossed their garbage and waste, and it burned continually to consume the trash. Wild animals ate there, and you could hear the gnashing of teeth.

When Jesus talked about hell – gehenna – he described a place the people recognized – an unpleasant place - a place of continual fire and the gnashing of teeth. It was the city dump! When Jesus talked about hell, he described the consequences of rejecting God in a way that people could understand.

Whether you believe hell is a state of being or a place, it is something that is unpleasant, and completely and utterly separated from God. It is for people who want nothing to do with God.

So why would Jesus choose to go where people are completely and utterly separated from God as these verses seem to imply? And why is it important? I am going to give you three reasons why Jesus went there and why is it important.

One, it means that Jesus really died. Jesus went to the place of the dead because he was really dead. This was important in light of the resurrection. Some people claimed that Jesus didn't really die; he just fainted on the cross and was taken off the cross early. The coolness of the cave where he was placed revived him. Thus, when Jesus began to appear to people, they said he never was dead in the first place.

By saying Jesus descended to the dead or to hell, it reinforces that Jesus was truly dead when taken off the cross and the resurrection was really real.

It means that death is not the last word because Jesus rose again. It means that death is not a barrier that God cannot get past. This phrase asserts the supremacy of God over death itself. Romans 14 says, “For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.”

So, the phrase “he descended into hell” is important because it shows that Jesus really died and the resurrection was really real, and God has power over death.

There is another reason why Jesus descended to hell...and this is a tough one. Scripture says that when Jesus hung on the cross, the iniquity of us all was laid on him (Isaiah 53:6). All of our sins went on Jesus. And that is why he cried, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” For the first time in his life, Jesus was separated from God. Not because of his sin, but because of ours. Therefore, Jesus’ death was as hellish as death can get.

That’s a tough one, isn’t it? But, it is important. God, who is holy, experienced godlessness – hell – for us.

Here is an example from the confirmation curriculum. Remember when you were sick as a kid and throwing up. Ok, maybe you can’t remember back that far. How about: remember when your kids used to throw up. Who cleaned it up? You did! On their behalf, for your kids. Why? To demonstrate your love for them in a massive sacrifice.

Jesus went to hell to demonstrate in the most ultimate sacrifice that he is willing to do the most difficult, most terrifying, most disgusting thing for you. God’s love is limitless; it even went to hell.

When we go through hellish experiences, we can feel utterly alone. However, we can take comfort in knowing that there is nowhere we can go where Christ has not already been. Even hell on earth. Jesus is present for us even in the darkest places, and we are not forsaken.

One man said this (James F. Kay), “By descending into hell, God in the person of Jesus Christ places the worst that can befall human beings within the redeeming embrace of the cross.”

So, the phrase “he descended into hell” is important because it shows how massive Jesus’ sacrifice was for you and me.

There is another compelling reason to consider why Jesus descended into hell. It is the first action of Jesus in his victory over death. Jesus went to the place of the dead to preach to them. It looks like they were given another chance.

You know, we Protestants don't think about that much. The Catholics do however; they believe the dead can still be reached by the saving power of the gospel. I knew some one who prayed for Janis Joplin, even though she died in 1970. She died of a drug overdose, but he believed she could still be reached for Jesus.

Scripture says that nothing can separate us from the love of God, not even death (Romans 8). James F. Kay said the descent of Christ "is the place in the Creed where the dead and the damned encounter their Savior and Lord."

There is no place beyond the reach of God. The Psalmist said, "If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed Sheol, you are there"(Psalm 139:8)

Remember when I said that hell is mentioned 12 times in the NT, mostly by Jesus? In the Creed, hell is spoken of in reference to Jesus. Hell is now linked to Jesus' name. Jesus did not evade hell. He entered into it. Hell is now defined by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He literally made it to hell and back.

Nothing and nobody is beyond the reach of God. Phil 2:10 says at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow in heaven and on earth and *under the earth*.

The phrase "he descended into hell" is important because it shows no place is beyond the reach of God.

So next time you say the phrase "he descended into hell," remember, Jesus' death was no sham. He really experienced death.

The next time you say the phrase "he descended in hell," remember, Jesus took on hell for you and me.

The next time you say the phrase "he descended into hell," remember, there is no corner of the universe into which the message of grace has not gone.

This is our Savior! Alleluia.

Take your hymnals, and turn to page 14. Please stand. As we prepare to take communion, we state what we believe as we say together "The Apostle's Creed."

Offering

We covered some things today that we don't fully understand. Paul says we see through a glass darkly or dimly. But someday, we will see face to face. Someday we will fully understand all that God has done for us. So, we live by faith. And we give back to the God who has done more than we can imagine. Let us receive our gifts and offerings.