

What Does it Mean that Jesus "Descended Into Hell"?

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When the third edition of the Roman Missal was put into use in the U.S. in Advent 2011, Catholics were given the option of occasionally reciting at Mass the Apostles' Creed instead of the more familiar Nicene Creed.

In the Apostles' Creed, it is said of Jesus that, after his death, "he descended into hell." Since then, I have been asked many times by worshippers what this affirmation means. Surely, Jesus cannot have literally gone down to hell, the place of the Devil and the damned. And if he did so descend, what was the purpose: Surely the damned cannot be saved?

In the context of the Apostles' Creed, hell does not mean what we understand by the word today. The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains this point as follows: "Scripture calls the abode of the dead, to which the dead Christ went down, "hell"-Sheol-- in Hebrew or Hades in Greek--because those who are there are deprived of the vision of God. Such is the case for all the dead, whether evil or righteous, while they await the redeemer (no. 633).

Jesus was not going into the place of the damned, "but to free the just who had gone before him" (ibid.). Jesus went into hell to preach the Gospel to the dead. As the Catechism puts it, "The descent into hell brings the Gospel message of salvation to complete fulfillment. This is the last phase of Jesus' messianic mission, a phase which is condensed in time but vast in its real significance: the spread of Christ's redemptive work to all men of all times and all places" (no. 634).

An Ancient Homily for Holy Saturday (quoted in no. 635 of the Catechism) expresses powerfully the meaning of Jesus' descent into hell. It reads in part: "The King . . . has raised up all those who have slept ever since the world began. . . . He has gone to search for Adam, our first father, as for a lost sheep. Greatly desiring to visit those who live in darkness and the shadow of death, he has gone to free from sorrow Adam in his bonds and Eve, captive with him--He who is both their God and the son of Eve. . . . [Jesus says to Adam] 'I am your God, who for your sake has become your son. . . . I order you, O sleeper, awake. I did not create you to be a prisoner in hell. Rise from the dead, for I am the life of the dead.'"

The Catechism situates Jesus' descent into hell in a larger context: "The frequent New Testament affirmations that Jesus was 'raised from the dead' presuppose that the crucified one sojourned in the realm of the dead prior to his resurrection. This was the first meaning given in the apostolic preaching to Christ's descent into hell: that Jesus, like all men, experienced death and in his soul joined the others in the realm of the dead. But he descended there as Savior, proclaiming the Good News to the spirits imprisoned there" (no. 632).

In early Christianity, then, hell had two meanings. It was, on the one hand, the place of the damned who had fundamentally rejected all that is good and just and condemned themselves to an eternity without God. On the other hand, it had a more neutral meaning as the place where the just who lived before Christ went to await salvation.