

The land of the dead

Jesus ... "descended to hell"

Readings: Ps 16:7 – 11, 1 Pet 3:18 - 22

In 1741, Jonathan Edwards preached a famous sermon. Here is a tiny excerpt:

"And you children, who are unconverted, do not you know that you are going down to hell, to bear the dreadful wrath of that God, who is now angry with you every day and every night?"

Q Anyone know what the sermon was called?

A Sinners in the hands of an angry God

It was said that people who heard the sermon that day could feel the flames of hell licking about them in the pews where they sat!

Q How many sermons have you heard preached about Hell?
What do you think about hell?

Nobody preaches on it. A big part of that is because it is unpopular and maybe it should be. Another huge reason is because the doctrine of hell is very difficult and very sound theologians have such different ideas about it. It seems to me that Scripture is not at all clear about what hell is, how long it lasts, who it's for etc etc.

One of today's young theologians, Benjamin L Corey, asks some great questions:

Is God perfectly moral in all his ways?

Is God altogether good?

Is he altogether lovely?

Does God look exactly like Jesus– the one who said "I desire mercy, not sacrifice"?

Corey goes on to say that of course the answer is "Yes" to all those questions. His challenge from there is that those truths about God force us to rethink the tradition of hell as "eternal, conscious torment."

Corey is blunt: "if we don't, we're saying that burning people to torture them is sick and twisted when ISIS does it, but that it's good and wonderful when God does it."¹

I think he has a very valid point.

So today we are talking about another phrase of the Apostolic Creed - Jesus
"descended into hell".

Before we go into this in any depth I want to make some general comments about hell. Yes, I know the word for hell used in our first and second readings is actually mis-translated in

¹ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/formerlyfundie/why-isis-should-make-christians-rethink-the-doctrine-of-hell/>

many versions. In the New Testament, the word often translated as hell, is Hades. That same word is Sheol in the First (Old) Testament. Hades doesn't mean the place of punishment, it simply means the place where the dead are. In fact it refers to a person; Hades was the King of the Dead and dead people lived in his house.

The world for hell, in the sense of a place of punishment, is not Hades but Gehenna. Gehenna is a literal place outside of the walls of Jerusalem. It is a valley where the fire god Moloch was worshipped with human sacrifice. When that was stopped, the valley became a huge rubbish tip.

As I said there are many thoughts about that place so I will discuss it briefly before moving on to our main topic of Jesus' descent into Hades.

There are at least five main views about hell:

- Metaphorical
- Literal
- Annihilation
- A middle state of purgatory
- Hell on earth

To oversimplify things hugely:

The metaphorical view says that the passages which seem to indicate a lake of fire or place of torment are allegorical. "Images of heaven and hell in Scripture are not to be taken literally, as if there were real gates of pearl and material smoke and flames."² The speakers or writers use poetic language to make a point. Most who believe in a metaphorical hell do believe hell exists but that it is outside human capability to imagine what it really is like.

The literal view is that the Scriptures are to be taken exactly as written. There is a lake of fire that God continues to sustain into eternity. All those who have not followed Christ during this life will be tormented there forever. This is the view that many, including Corey, find impossible to believe.

Annihilationists, or conditionalists, believe that those who reject the Lord will simply cease to exist after the second judgement. Some say hell exists before the second judgement. Others say we simply sleep before the second judgement. Both sub-groups cannot conceive of a God who would waste energy on sustaining something like hell, when the universe has been renewed. Nor can they conceive that a loving God would act in this way. They also argue that Christ is not truly victorious if hell continues to exist. At best he contains all evil rather than overcoming it. For Christ to have the victory over evil, the evil must be entirely eliminated.

It is mostly Roman Catholics who hold to belief in a middle state of purgatory. The reasoning is that none of us, whether we are followers of Christ or not, are pure enough to stand face to face before God immediately on leaving this earth. None of us is sinless. Some say we

² William V. Crockett in *Four Views of Hell*, 76

will be 'purged' of our sin, others see purgatory more as a state of being brought to maturity in Christ before actually meeting him.

There are also people, who don't believe in eternal life at all. They would say we make our own heaven or hell on earth. I'm not sure what that says about those who appear to be caught in hellish situations through little fault of their own.

I give you this information simply to alert you that things are not often as straightforward as they seem. It behoves us always to have genuine humility when it comes to interpreting God's Word.

Now, what we are really focusing on today: Jesus descending into Hades. We really ought to translate the creeds' 'hell' for 'hades'. Hades can correctly be translated as prison, the pit, or the grave. The Jewish people had no fully developed understanding of life after death that we know of. They believed everyone went to Sheol (Hades), the place of the dead. There was no implication of punishment or anything else in Hades as there is in Hell.

Take a minute to think about the difference. Hell vs Hades. How do you see them?

In one sense saying that Jesus descended into hell is a way of emphasising that Jesus really was dead. Jesus went into the land of the dead. This was no state of unconsciousness but actual physical death. This is what Scripture describes as the first death as opposed to a second death that some will experience..³

But this simple phrase expresses much more than this. Jesus' follower, Peter writes that Jesus didn't simply go there as some have said to endure what we should have. Jesus' purpose was much wider than that. Jesus preached to the souls present in that place or state of death. He preached to those who had disobeyed God in the past. The example given is that of those who would not heed Noah, during the 120 years, before the flood. That is only an example; it shouldn't be taken that these are the only ones in Hades.

Jesus purpose in going into the grave was to preach to the dead. The early church thought that Jesus didn't preach to everyone in hell though. Initially they thought he preached to their Jewish forefathers, to the saints, the prophets and the martyrs of the Old Testament. Jesus preached to those who were already in the IN -team and lead them out of hades into heaven.

The doctrine of the church developed further from that point. Clement of Alexandria took seriously Peter's further teaching in chapter four. Especially verse 6

³ Rev 20:6

...the Good News was preached to those who are now dead—so although they were destined to die like all people, they now live forever with God in the Spirit.

Clement was a great scholar and Christian teacher. He had ‘a very beautiful and a very gracious conception’ though the church as a whole didn’t accept his ideas.⁴ He thought that Jesus preached not only to the faithful but also to the Gentiles; at least to those Gentiles who had followed as much light as they knew. He posed a theory that accounted for the question about those who have never heard the Gospel.

There is one more development in Jesus journey into hades. This idea is that Jesus didn’t so much descend as invade. Jesus is the conqueror who vanquished death. Those who were dead were made alive again by the victory of Christ over all that is evil. There are a couple of apocryphal books: The Gospel of Nicodemus and The Acts of Pilate which spell out that view.

The question for us is:

What does this statement that “Jesus descended into hell” mean for us today?

Remember the word ‘hell’ is a mistranslation. The word ‘descended’ is also misleading if we are to take it literally. We don’t understand the world as heaven, earth and hell in three layers.

What about the land of the dead? Do we go along with the Jewish understanding of an intermediate state before entering full into the life to come?

There are many questions. But the most important remains:

What does this statement that “Jesus descended into hell” mean for us today?

The original intention of emphasising Jesus’ very real death is still valid today. But this phrase of the Creed means much more than that to me.

It seems to me that however it seemed, God didn’t abandon Jesus totally. Jesus is God. So God himself went into the land of the dead, to preach to the dead, to bring out all those who seemed abandoned – perhaps even through their own choice. God doesn’t give up on us even when we are dead. God’s grace is limitless.

Jesus descended into Hades speaks the language of hope, the language of devotion, the language of poetry, the language of vision. It states a fact but opens up an endless window of God’s bountiful grace. Nothing is too hard for him. He will go to any ends to bring us into relationship with himself.

⁴ William Barclay, The plain man looks at the Apostles’ Creed, 129

There will come a time when every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.⁵ That time will come about, not because people are forced to do so but because the love of God will win us over.

This is the core of the Gospel – God loves us in crazy, crazy ways that we can't even begin to comprehend.

I'll leave the last word to Corey. "God is not like an ISIS terrorist burning his enemies– but God is actually Jesus on the cross dying for his."⁶

⁵ Phillipians 2:10

⁶ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/formerlyfundie/why-isis-should-make-christians-rethink-the-doctrine-of-hell/>