

Translational Notes on the Apostles' Creed: Christ "Descended to the Dead"

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To many people, one of the more confusing phrases in the Apostles' Creed is the part where it says that after his death and burial Christ "descended into hell." Many people mistakenly assume this word "hell" here refers to the fiery place of punishment (the Greek word "Gehenna" in the Scriptures), or that it refers to the realm or 'headquarters' of the devil (an entirely unbiblical concept). The original word in the Creed means neither of these things.

Descend = To Go Down

The Greek phrase used here is "*katelthonta eis ta katotata*", which literally means: "he went down to the down-place." The word *katotata* (down) corresponds to word *katoteros* (lower) as it is used in the Scriptures to describe the descent of Christ in Ephesians 4:9-10:

*When it says, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the **lower parts** [katoteros] of the earth? He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.*

The "lower parts" referred to here is not a reference to the place of final punishment (Greek: *Gehenna*) but to "the place of the dead" (Greek: *Hades*, Hebrew: *Sheol*). These two biblical words, *Hades* in the New Testament and *Sheol* in the Old Testament, refer to the spiritual realm in which all the dead, both the righteous and wicked, go to await the final resurrection (see: Luke 16:19-31).

Contrary to our modern assumptions about human souls flying off to heaven upon death, the Scriptures teach that the dead go to a place of rest — a kind of spiritual 'sleep' — pictured as being within the depths of the earth. A vivid description of this concept is given in Job 14:10-13 (note the reference to 'down' and 'low'):

But mortals die, and are laid low; humans expire, and where are they? As waters fail from a lake, and a river wastes away and dries up, so mortals lie down and do not rise again; until the heavens are no more, they will not awake or be roused out of their sleep. Oh that you would hide me in Sheol, that you would conceal me until your wrath is past, that you would appoint me a set time, and remember me!

What is really meant in the phrase from the Apostles' Creed is that Jesus "descended to the dead" — that is, to Sheol/Hades, the place where all dead people go.

For us to confess our faith that Jesus "descended to the dead" reminds us that we are never separated from his presence. Not even in death are we beyond God's reach, as the psalmist writes: "*If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there also.*" (Psalm 139:8)

Resurrection = To Rise Again

But death is not the end for us. The promise of Christ's resurrection is that Sheol/Hades did not have the power to hold him; Christ rose again from the dead. What's more, he has promised us that he will come again to raise us up from our "rest in peace" to live with him forever. "*For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.*" (Romans 6:5)

Like a sleep in which we experience no time, the resurrection from death will come for us "*in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable.*" (1 Corinthians 15:52) At Jesus' return, we who belong to Christ will enter into a new and eternal life, together with all the faithful who have gone before us.