

¹⁸ Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, ¹⁹ by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison, ²⁰ who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water. ²¹ There is also an antitype which now saves us – baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Text: 1 Peter 3:18-21 A 4-12-26 Ezekiel 37:1-14 John 20:19-31 Psalm: 118 Psalmody (p. 29, WS)
Hymns: 198, 367, 190, 799

CHRIST'S VICTORIOUS DESCENT INTO HELL

Christ the Lord is ris'n again! Christ has broken death's strong chain!
Hark, the angels shout for joy, Singing evermore on high: Hallelujah!

He whose path no records tell Hath descended into hell;
He the strong man armed hath bound And in highest heav'n is crowned. Hallelujah!

Now He bids us tell abroad How the lost may be restored,
How the penitent forgiven, How, we, too, may enter heaven. Hallelujah! (TLH #190:1, 4, 6)

Dear fellow believers in our risen and living Savior, Jesus Christ,

In The Apostles' Creed we confess that Jesus "descended into hell." Where does it say that in the Bible? Why did Jesus descend into hell? Was Jesus' descent into hell part of His suffering? What does Jesus' descent into hell mean for us?

We're told, "*Christ ... suffered once for sins.*" In Old Testament times, before Jesus came to earth as our Savior, God commanded His people to offer animal sacrifices. The animal sacrifices were a picture of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. It was sad that those innocent animals had to die. It's sad that the innocent Son of God had to die. The animal sacrifices were made because the people were sinful. Jesus died on the cross because of our sins.

We're told that Jesus died "*once for sins.*" Hebrews 7:27 says that Jesus "*does not need daily, as [the Old Testament] high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people's, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself.*" We don't sacrifice animals anymore because we have Jesus' sacrifice. If we went back to sacrificing animals in effect we would be saying that Jesus' sacrifice wasn't enough. But Jesus' sacrifice is enough. "*The blood of Jesus Christ [God's] Son cleanses us from all sin*" – 1 John 1:7.

We're told that Jesus, "*the Just,*" died for us, "*the unjust.*" The Bible says, "*All have sinned*" (Ac. 3:23). The Bible says that Jesus "*is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners*" (He. 7:26). We can't make up for our sins and make ourselves right with God. Jesus paid for our sins with His sacrifice on the cross. Jesus forgives us, taking all of our sins away.

We're told that Jesus died for us *"that He might bring us to God."* If it weren't for Jesus, the holy, righteous God would be angry with us. But because of Jesus and what He did for us, God loves us and forgives us. God knows that you and I are sinners. We can be painfully aware of that fact. Romans 5:8 says, *"While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."* We are sinners. Jesus died for sinners. Therefore Jesus died for us. As our High Priest, Jesus 'reminds' His Father, so to speak, that He sacrificed Himself for us. The Bible says, *"We have a great High Priest..., Jesus the Son of God.... Let us therefore come boldly to [God's] throne of grace...."* (He. 4:14, 16)

We're told that Jesus was *"put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit."* The days of Christ's Humiliation during His earthly ministry were over. He descended into hell as the all-powerful, glorious, victorious Son of God!

Just before He died Jesus declared, *"It is finished!"* (Jn. 19:30). Jesus had done everything His Father had sent Him to do, everything that needed to be done to save us. *"It is finished"* in the original also means, *"It is paid in full."* Jesus paid for all of our sins. There's nothing left for us to do to be saved. By faith in Jesus, our sins are forgiven, we're saved, and we're going to heaven.

We're told that Jesus *"went and preached to the spirits in prison, who ... were disobedient."* This is talking about Jesus' descent into hell. Since Jesus had already paid for our sins, His descent into hell wasn't part of His suffering. Jesus' descent into hell was part of His victory! The devil is very powerful. Jesus calls the devil *"the ruler of this world"* (Jn. 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). But we read in 1 John 4:4, *"He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world."* The devil is strong, but Jesus is stronger. Jesus is our Savior, Friend, and Protector. *"If God is for us, who can be against us?"* (Ro. 8:31). 1 John 3:8 says, *"The Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil."* The devil is a powerful enemy. But the devil is a defeated enemy. As God prophesied, the devil bruised Jesus' heel. Jesus did die. But Jesus crushed the devil's head. (See Ge. 3:15.) Jesus rose from the dead in victory!

Since Jesus didn't descend into hell as part of His suffering for our sins, why did He descend into hell? Why did Jesus die on the cross? for our sins. Jesus descended into hell to show Satan and his demons and those in hell that He, Jesus, had defeated sin. Satan tries to accuse us of our sins, but Jesus forgives us. Jesus descended into hell also to show His enemies that He had defeated death. *"O Death, where is your sting? O [Grave], where is your victory?" ... Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ* – 1 Corinthians 15:55, 57. Jesus says, *"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die"* (Jn. 11:25-26). By faith in Jesus, death is simply the passageway to eternal life in heaven! Jesus descended into hell also to show Satan that He, Jesus, had defeated hell. Satan couldn't keep Jesus in hell.

Hell is a terrible place where, Jesus says, *"their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched"* (Mk. 9:46). But because of Jesus we don't have to be afraid of hell. Jesus descended into hell and came back out, victorious over hell. By faith in Jesus we're not going to hell, we're going to heaven! Jesus assures us, *"I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone pluck them out of My hand"* (Jn. 10:27, my emphases). *"Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to*

prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.” (Jn. 14:1-3)

The Bible says, *“The Lord ... is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. ... Consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation”* (2 Pet. 3:9, 15a). God doesn’t want anyone to go to hell. God wants everyone to go to heaven. Sometimes we wonder why God allows all the evil in the world. God is *“longsuffering”*: patient, working to save people before the Judgement Day comes and it’s too late for them.

We’re told that *“the spirits in prison”* are the souls of those who *“were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared.”* God gave people all those years while Noah built the ark. They saw the ark, and they had the opportunity to hear Noah tell them why he was building the ark (2 Pet. 2:5). But they refused to listen to Noah, and believe. So, because of their unbelief, God destroyed them in the Flood, and sent them to hell.

We’re told that *“eight souls were saved through water.”* God through the ark kept believing Noah and his wife and their three sons and their sons’ wives safe from the Flood.

We’re told, *“There is also an antitype which now saves us – baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”* God rescued Noah and his family from death in the waters of the Flood. Through the water of Baptism, God rescues us from eternal death, and gives us eternal life. Titus 3:5-7 says, *“Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to [God’s] mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior; that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.”* In the words of our text and in the words we just heard, God says that He saves us through Baptism. When we’re baptized God gives us faith in Jesus Who died for our sins and rose again, and saves us.

By the way, when did Jesus descend into hell? We’re told that Jesus *“was put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison.”* This verse places Jesus’ descent into hell between His death on the cross and the resurrection.

Jesus died for our sins and rose again. Our sins are forgiven. Jesus descended into hell and came out again. We don’t have to be afraid of death or the devil or hell. Jesus gives us the victory over them all!

He’s risen, He’s risen, Christ Jesus, the Lord; He opened Death’s prison, the Incarnate Word.
Break forth, hosts of heaven, in jubilant song, And, earth, sea, and mountain, the [glad song]
prolong.

Then sing your hosannas and raise your glad voice; Proclaim the blest tidings that all may rejoice.

Laud, honor, and praise to the Lamb that was slain, Who sitteth in glory and ever shall reign.
Amen. (TLH #198:1, 5)