Affirming our Faith through the Apostles' Creed
He Descended into Hades

Text: 1 Peter 3:18-20 -- For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, 19 in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, 20 because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water.

Introduction: The fine Christian author, **Os Guinness**, in his book ***Impossible People***, says, "**One of the greatest Christian leaders of the last century was John R. W. Stott, rector of All Souls Langham Place in London and a peerless preacher**, **Bible teacher, evangelist, author, global leader and friend to many."** Guinness continues, **"I knew him over many decades, but I will never forget my last visit to his bedside three weeks before he died. After an unforgettable hour and more of sharing many memories over many years, I asked him how he would like me to pray for him. Lying weakly on his back and barely able to speak, he answered in a hoarse whisper**, '***Pray that I will be faithful to Jesus until my last breath***.'" **Less than a month left to live, and he's asking a brother to pray that he will be faithful to Jesus**! You may be wondering why are we studying the Apostles' Creed**.** My answer is because we want to be just **like John R. W. Stott** – faithful to Jesus until our last breaths have been drawn. For that to happen, we must be anchored in the truth of God's Word. Only then will we be **thoroughly equipped for every good work** that God has in store for us (**2 Timothy 3:17**). Now … for today's message I'm going to be talking about the most controversial part of **the Apostles' Creed** – the line that says – **He descended in to Hades**. Though we say Hades because we believe that's what the early church fathers had in mind, to be more accurate the earliest version in which this statement is found says – **He descended into Hell**. These words were written in an attempt to answer the question, "***What was Jesus doing in the time between his death and resurrection***?" Before I go any further, I feel the need to tell you that while there are hints and clues that help us understand what happened to Jesus while He was in the tomb, the truth is that we really don't know for sure. **There are several possible answers to the question and we know that all of them cannot be right**. Still, it was important enough to the authors of the creed that they included it and now it is incumbent upon us to figure out in what sense Jesus descended into the place of the dead and what this means for us. Let's try to figure it out together by starting with this question …

Where did "*He descended into Hell/Hades*" come from? **Here's a quick history lesson for you**. It comes from the Apostles' Creed, ***though not from its earliest versions***,

portions of which date all the way back to around **200 A.D**. In fact, it wasn't until a hundred and ninety years later (**390 A.D.**) that the statement was found for the first time in one of two versions of the creed recorded by a man named **Rufinus**. According to church historian, **Philip Schaff**, ***Rufinus never took it to mean that Jesus actually went to Hell, but that He was buried in a grave***. Another two hundred and sixty years passed (**650 A.D**.) before the phrase "**He descended into Hell**" was found again and only then was it taken literally. **Many people would argue on this basis alone** (*it did not have this meaning until 450 years after the creed began to take shape*) **that the early church fathers did not believe Jesus to have descended into Hell**.

So, what *does* the Bible say about Jesus in the tomb? Here are three passages that shed some light on the subject. **First**, there's **Psalm 16:10** which says, **"Because you will not abandon me to the grave (Sheol) nor let your holy one see decay**." The Hebrew word "**Sheol**" is translated in the KJV as "**Hell**" but it actually referred to the temporary residence of the dead until the Day of Judgment. In the New Testament, the word used is "**Hades**" which gradually came to mean something different … **the grave** … the place where they placed Jesus' body (Peter quotes **Psalm 16:10** and applies it to the Lord in **Acts 2:27.) So, these verses tell us that Sheol and Hades were considered synonymous with the grave**. **A second passage** to look at is **Colossians 2:15** where Paul says, "**He (God) disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame**, **by triumphing over them in Him**." To understand this verse, we need to identify the rulers and authorities. **Ephesians 6:12** uses the same words with regard to **the spiritual forces of evil who, by the way, are not flesh and blood**. **They are demons, fallen angels who by virtue of Christ's death on the cross have been so decisively conquered that their eventual outcome can never be in doubt**. These powerful, malignant, demonic forces, against which we were helpless, have been disarmed and publicly humiliated, as well as their weapons taken from them. **The background for this verse is a Roman general's triumphant entry into the capital city after a great military victory. Citizens would line the streets and cheer the conquering general and his army upon their return. Parading behind them, last of all, would have been a long line of dirty, defeated soldiers who were brought back as proof of yet another victory for Rome**. When Jesus died something truly wonderful took place in the spiritual realm, seen by angels and Old Testament believing saints alike. The triumphant Christ disarmed Satan and his demons and marched them in full view of everyone in Heaven. **The third passage** is from the text I just read a little bit ago – **1 Peter 3:18-20**. **Verse eighteen** is a simple and clear statement about the atonement … **Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh** (***Jesus' human body died***), **but made alive in the spirit** (i.e. ***Jesus' human spirit which was restored after having been forsaken*** *((My God, My God, Why has Thou forsaken Me?))*.

Verses 19 and 20 continue – **…in which (speaking of Jesus' human spirit) He went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared.** This passage is referring to evil spirits that were extremely rebellious during the days of Noah and filled the earth and its inhabitants with their evil deeds, so much so, that even 120 years of preaching by Noah had no effect on the people, with the exception of his family. These demons were cast into a place called **the abyss** from which there was no escape (*a place they continue to fear* – **Luke 8:31 – And they** ((*a legion of demons*)) **begged Jesus repeatedly not to order them to go into the abyss**). After conquering sin and death on the cross Jesus preached to them. We don't know the content of His message, but we do know it was not about repentance and faith because Jesus did not come to redeem anyone but man (**Hebrews 2:16 – For surely it is not angels that He helps, but the offspring of Abraham**).

So, what have we learned so far? Sheol in the Old Testament was interpreted to be Hades (the grave) and in the New Testament; whatever else happened, Jesus disarmed the spiritual forces of evil and paraded them before those in heaven declaring His victory at the cross; and He preached to the demons in the abyss who had led mankind to such a state of evil that even 120 years of preaching from Noah couldn't bring them to repentance. **THESE ARE SOME OF THE VERSES THAT LED THE CHURCH FATHERS TO SAY "HE DESCENDED INTO HELL (OR WE WOULD SAY … HADES … THE GRAVE) IN THE APOSTLES' CREED.**"

What doesn't "*He descended into Hell/Hades*" mean? Popular preacher **Ray Pritchard** says there are a couple of things it can't mean. **First**, **this isn't God's way of saying that those already dead are given another opportunity for salvation**. Not when the Bible says, "**It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment**" (**Hebrews 9:27**). Jesus Himself said, "**A time is coming when *all* who are in their graves** (tombs) **will hear His voice and come out—those who have done good will rise to live and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned** (**John 5:28-29**). There just is no mention that those in the grave will get a second chance. This, by the way, seems to negate **the teaching of Purgatory** – the place where Christians in need of holiness and purification go to pay for their venial sins (*offenses that warrant only temporary punishment*). ***Believers, after all, are not condemned by God***. Jesus died so we would not have to pay the penalty for our sins, **but if someone dies without Him, he is lost forever**. **Second**, **it cannot mean that Jesus burned in the flames of Hell**. On the cross, Jesus completely satisfied the penalty for sin. When His work was completed, He committed His spirit to the hands of His Father. There is nothing in the Bible that remotely suggests that Jesus then had to suffer the pains of Hell to bring about our

redemption. ***Why would He when His work was already finished, our dept paid in full***? The movie ***In America*** is the story of a young Irish family that illegally relocates to New York City from Canada. The movie focuses on the emotional, spiritual, and financial challenges Johnny, Sarah, and their young daughters Christy and Ariel face as they begin a new life. The family settles in a rundown tenement apartment in a neighborhood known for its drug trafficking. They befriend a reclusive African-American man, **Mateo Kwame**, in their building who is seriously ill. He is a gifted artist from a wealthy background but is nonetheless living in this rundown neighborhood. When Sarah discovers she is pregnant, Mateo predicts the child will enrich their impoverished lives. As the pregnancy develops, doctors find that the baby has significant problems and may not survive. Hospital bills mount, Johnny promises payment, yet he is incapable of raising the thousands of dollars needed. After Sarah gives birth, their premature son lies in an incubator struggling for life as the parents look on worriedly. **At that very moment, Mateo is in the same hospital near death**. His face grimaces in pain as his head rears back and his eyes open. The scene cuts back to the baby, his eyes suddenly open and he draws his little hand near his face emitting a hungry cry. Johnny and Sarah smile broadly. They each reach an index finger toward their son. **Back to Mateo whose eyes grow big and then close for the last time**. As the nurse holds his hand, it falls limp. ***One lives, one dies at almost the exact same moment***. The scene then shifts to the area of the hospital where bills are paid. The business manager's voice is heard. "**The hospital bill arrived. It came to $30,420.20**." Johnny begs for more time to find a job so he can begin to pay down this enormous medical expense. "***The bill's been paid***," the business manager says matter-of-factly while scrolling down her computer screen. Johnny asks in disbelief, "***What do you mean***?" "***A Mateo Kwame paid it***," she adds hitting the enter button on her computer. "***There's no balance.***" Listen…that's the way it is with Jesus too! **We can't add anything to what Jesus did and He doesn't have to sacrifice anything more than what He already has. He satisfied our debt when He died on the cross. God will accept no other payment for our sin!**

What does "*He descended into Hell/Hades*" mean? Here are two answers to the question:

- **Jesus died**. In fact, it is perfectly right to say that Jesus entered into the human experience of dying as much as any other person who has lived or ever will. He knows what the grave is all about and now according to **Revelation 1:18,** He has the keys of death and Hades. This grants Him power and authority over them. Ultimately, they (*death and Hades*), too, will be destroyed … cast into the Lake of Fire (**Revelation 20:14**).
- **In dying, Jesus defeated the devil**. Listen to what the Word says about Jesus' decisive victory over Satan: **(1) He has crushed his head just as it was foretold**

(**Genesis 3:15**); **(2) Jesus destroyed the works of the devil in bringing sin and death into our world** (**1 John 3:8 – The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil**); **(3) He has freed us from slavery to sin and the devil** (**Hebrews 2:15 – He has delivered all of those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery**); **(4) He has disarmed the demons and publicly exposed them in His triumphant procession** (**Colossians 2:15 -- He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him**; **(5) He has assured the devil's fate** (**John 16:11 – the ruler of this world is judged**).

Do you like the hymn – ***A Mighty Fortress is Our God***? If you do then the third verse should be particularly meaningful: **And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us, we will not fear, for God hath willed his truth to triumph through us. The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him; his rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure; one little word shall fell him**. What's the word? Jesus!

What difference does all of this make? It means that …

- **Death has been defeated**. Some day we'll see the death of death (**1 Corinthians 15:26 – The last enemy to be destroyed is death**), but for now, we rest in the knowledge that it holds no power over us who believe in Christ. We do not need to fear it anymore!
- **Satan has been destroyed**. He has not yet been destroyed in the sense of "put away for good". That will happen. The Apostle John describes this event in **Revelation 20:10 -- …the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever**. But until then, know that the devil is a conquered foe, a toothless lion that holds no power over those who are in Christ. Here's why. **Hebrews 2:14** says, "**By His death He might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is the devil**. Jesus' death took care of it!
- **Salvation has been accomplished**. **The sacrifice has been made. Jesus, the righteous One, died for all of us who are unrighteous, to bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh and made alive in the spirit**. Salvation is now a free gift to be received … paid for in full by our Lord's sacrifice on the cross.

Conclusion: **DEATH HAS BEEN DEFEATED; SATAN HAS BEEN DESTROYED; SALVATION HAS BEEN ACCOMPLISHED**! To think that all this good came from something that was seemingly so bad. "**Jesus was crucified, dead and buried. He descended into Hades**." Eight years ago, the people of London witnessed a spectacular scene **when a giant wooden replica of the city ignited and burned brilliantly to the ground**. The blaze was

planned, however, in honor of the 350th anniversary of **the Great Fire of London**. The original fire began on **September 2, 1666**, in the early morning at a bakery on **Pudding Lane**. The surrounding structures were soon engulfed, and the fire spread to the rest of the city with devastating effect, **lasting four entire days**. The modern-day festival to remember the disaster is known as "**London's Burning**" and **contains four days of free art events, concluding this year with the grand burning of the replica of medieval London**. At first glance, it seems a bit odd to celebrate such a catastrophe—especially with another fire. However, as gruesome as the Great Fire may have been, it now has its place firmly etched into the city's history as a turning point: **the beginning of a time of regrowth and resurgence for London**.

You know … Christians arguably perform the same "**odd**" type of ritual when we take communion and decorate our homes and sacred buildings with crosses. **We not only commemorate the brutal murder of Jesus, but we adorn our worship with the murder weapon: the cross, one of the most widely known torture devices of that time period**. **And yet – it doesn't seem strange to us—because we know that what Satan intended to be the ultimate act of evil, God turned around to be the ultimate act of love. The tables were turned, and death and the devil were conquered and our salvation was accomplished all because Jesus died our death so that we could share His life**.

NOW JOIN ME AND LET'S DECLARE WHAT WE BELIEVE ABOUT THE CHRIST'S VICTORY BY RECITING TOGETHER THE APOSTLES' CREED.

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I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth: And in Jesus Christ His only Son, Our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; He descended into Hades; The third day He rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Amen.