



Thoughts from the Bible and Books Devotions from The Heidelberg Catechism

University Reformed Church

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- 40 **Q.** *Why did Christ have to go all the way to death?*
A. Because God's justice and truth demanded it: only the death of God's Son could pay for sin.
- 41 **Q.** *Why was he "buried"?*
A. His burial testifies that he really died.
- 42 **Q.** *Since Christ has died for us, why do we still need to die?*
A. Our death does not pay the debt for our sins. Rather, it puts an end to our sinning and is our entrance into eternal life.
- 43 **Q.** *What further advantage do we receive from Christ's sacrifice and death on the cross?*
A. Through Christ's death our old selves are crucified, put to death, and buried with him, so that the evil desires of the flesh may no longer rule us, but that instead we may dedicate ourselves as an offering of gratitude to him.
- 44 **Q.** *Why does the creed add, "He descended to hell"?*
A. To assure me in times of personal crisis and temptation that Christ my Lord, by suffering unspeakable anguish, pain, and terror of soul, especially on the cross but also earlier, has delivered me from the anguish and torment of hell.

Jesus Christ died for our sins. God's justice demanded it (Q. 40) and his burial testifies to it (Q. 41). Jesus did not swoon or slip into a coma or fall asleep on the cross. He died—stone cold dead and buried.

But why then do we still die (Q. 42)? If Christ's death meant the death of death and paid in full the penalty for our sin, why do 100 out of 100 Christians still die? The Catechism mentions three points in response. First, we need to make clear that our death does not atone for anything. There is no merit won for us in death because (1) our lives cannot earn God's favor and (2) all the merit we could ever own has already been won for us by Christ.

Second, we need to die so we can stop sinning. I don't know that I've ever comforted the dying with this thought. But I should. In this life we cannot escape the tension of the already and the not yet. We are already holy and righteous and new creations in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17), but our transformation is not yet complete, so that we still have to fight against the old nature (Rom. 8:13; 1 Cor. 9:24-27) and wage war against the lusts of the flesh

(1 Peter 2:11). But after death, the war is over. When loved ones die of cancer or some debilitating disease we often hear how "they fought bravely for many years, and now the fight is over and her suffering has ended." We ought to say the same thing about spiritual disease: "She loved the Lord with all her heart and fought against indwelling sin for the past 40 years. Now the fight is over and she has overcome." Like any of us, there are aspects of dying that frighten me. But Answer 42 has reminded me of an aspect of the good news that I often forget. After death, I won't think another proud thought, I won't snap at my kids again, I won't have another temptation to lust, and I won't be full of myself ever again. What sweet relief.

Third, death is an entrance into more life. This is why we still die even though Jesus died to pay the penalty of death. In one sense, Christians die like everyone else, regardless of whether they are covered in the blood of Jesus. But in another sense, Christians don't die, they only move on to more life. This is the point Jesus seems to be making in John 11 when he tells Martha, "I am the

resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die” (25-26). So we won’t really die, Jesus says, because though we die, we shall yet live. For the Christian, death has lost its sting. There is no death as divine judgment for us, only death as the entrance into divine reward.

Question 43 lays the groundwork for the gratitude section of the Catechism yet to come (see Lord’s Day 33 especially). Christ’s death not only paid for our sins, it also put to death our sinful natures. Our progressive sanctification from sin is built on Christ’s atonement for sin. We have been crucified with Christ. We have been buried with him. We died to sin in his death. This doesn’t mean the fight for holiness is over, but rather that the fight can now begin. Because we are now slaves to righteousness instead of slaves to sin, and because what is wicked in us has been put to death, we dedicate ourselves, with confidence, to live as servants of God and those who are alive in Christ. It is only Christ’s finished work on the cross that paves the way for a life of good works, piety, and gratitude.

Question 44 is a hornet’s nest of trouble. What are we to do with the phrase “descended into hell” from the Apostles Creed? As Wayne Grudem points out in his Systematic Theology, unlike the Nicene Creed (which doesn’t say anything about a descent into hell), the Apostles’ Creed was not approved by a specific council at a specific time. Instead, the Creed took shape from 200-750 A.D., making it impossible to give a definitive statement of the text. The phrase “descended into hell” has been found in only one version of the Creed prior to 650 (Rufinus in 390), and in that instance the phrase was understood to mean “descended into the grave.” So, historically, there is some question about whether “descended into hell” should even be a part of the Creed.

But considering the phrase has been a part of the Apostles’ Creed for at least 1300 years, we should not dismiss it lightly. Having said this, we need to understand the phrase correctly if we are going to keep saying it. There are three ways to understand “descended into hell.” The phrase could refer to death. This is how Rufinus understood it. The Greek word *hades* in Rufinus’ version can simply mean the grave (*gehenna* being the more technical term for hell as a place of punishment). The problem with this view is that it makes the phrase redundant. Why do we need to confess that Jesus descended to the grave when the Creed already states that he died and was buried?

Another option is to take “hell” as the place of eternal punishment. Jesus, on this understanding, spent the days between his death and resurrection in the place of

eternal torment with the damned. This interpretation has many problems. For starters, Jesus told the thief on the cross they would be together that very day in paradise (Luke 23:46), a promise made difficult to deliver on if Jesus was on his way to hell. It’s hard to imagine Jesus crying out “It is finished” (John 19:30) and “into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 24:43), if he had more suffering to endure in hell. Moreover, the passages trotted out to defend Christ’s descent into a literal hell are unconvincing. Ephesians 4:9 speaks of Christ descending into the lower parts of the earth, but the reference here is to the incarnation. Just as Christ ascended after his death and resurrection into heaven from earth, so also he descended from heaven to earth at his birth. 1 Peter 4:6 says the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, but this is simply a reference to those who are now dead, not to the dead receiving preaching while in hell. Related to this is the confusing passage in 1 Peter 3 about Christ preaching to the spirits in prison (vv. 18-20). This seems like the medieval “harrowing of hell” where Jesus goes to the netherworld and tries to rescue the condemned. But the context has to do with the disobedient of Noah’s generation. The point of the passage is that the Spirit of Christ (1:11) was preaching through Noah (cf. 2 Peter 2:5) as he warned the ungodly souls before the flood who are now imprisoned under God’s judgment. The text is about God speaking through Noah to the disobedient in his generation, not Christ going to hell after death to save them then.

This leaves us with a final option, the one we find in Answer 44. Christ’s descent into hell is to be understood spiritually. To be honest, I’m not sure if this captures the original intent behind the phrase, or if we can even be certain of the original intent, but a spiritual understanding of Christ’s hell makes the most sense in the light of Scripture and allows me to confess the Creed without my fingers crossed.

Jesus “descended into hell” as he suffered the pain and torment of divine wrath. “Surely no more terrible abyss can be conceived,” argues Calvin, “than to feel yourself forsaken and estranged from God; and when you call upon him not to be heard” (*Inst.* 2.16.11). Many of us have experienced some of what Christ felt on the cross as he suffered through the “absence of God.” It should be a comfort to us in our torment that there is no hell we can face greater than the one Christ endured; there is no one better to sympathize with our hellish moments than Christ; and because of his propitiation, there is no one better to turn to for deliverance than his heavenly Father and ours