

Question 3: Did Jesus descend into Hell?

Introduction:

This question was brought to my attention because of the wording of the Apostle's Creed: "He descended into Hell." Many people have pondered what this phrase means. One of the major difficulties with this wording is that it is not consistent. Some newer versions of the Apostle's Creed chose to remove the word "Hell" and replace it with the phrase "descended to the dead." The Nicene creed does not state anything about Hell but instead consistently uses the word "dead." The central issues with this question stems from understanding Heaven and Hell and the implications of Jesus, who is God, going in to Hell. In the background of this question is also a theological debate that developed throughout the 20th century. Both of these issues we will discuss in more detail.

Eschatology

Eschatology is the study of the end times. This includes the concepts of Heaven, Hell and Purgatory as well as judgement, salvation, and the full-vision of God (aka the Beatific Vision). Before I head into each of these topics I want to set a foundation. Eschatology is not a science. I cannot prove the existence of Heaven, Hell, Purgatory, or tell you exactly what they will be like. All that we know about life after death is the information that came through revelation; what God has already revealed to us. Therefore much of the theological understandings of the end times is minimal at best and confusing at worst. Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory are not places. They do not occupy space as though they are on a planet or a country we have yet to discover. Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory are all states that are defined by the type of relationship the person is in with God after the point of death.

Heaven:

Heaven is the state of the human soul and body in which they are united completely and perfectly with God. The person must choose to live with God in order to be in Heaven. Thus the importance of free-will from last week. God desires above all else that we love him. Therefore he wishes that those in Heaven will love him in return. However, that is not the whole picture. In contrast to Hell, Heaven is where the soul willingly accepts God's love; not necessarily return his love. Those in Heaven live in a state of union with God, glorify him unceasingly, and enjoy the vision of the Almighty God our creator.

Hell:

Hell is the state of the human soul and person who completely rejects God. Those who are in Hell chose to reject God's love and desired not to return his love in response. This does not affect God's love to them. God cannot stop loving his people and his creation. Since he loves all completely, he cannot stop loving all people, even those in Hell. Therefore these people are in a constant state of being loved by a person whom they do not want loving them. The best example I can come up with for describing this state is a person who deeply loves another person and is willing to give him or herself to that person but the other person wants nothing to do with him or her.

The big question that theologians like to ponder in relation to Hell is, Is hell part of God? If all creation is part of God and God holds all things in creation, then anything not in God would cease to exist. If Hell is outside of God, then Hell would cease to exist because anything outside of God ceases to exist. This question was explored by a German theologian named Hans Urs Von Balthasar in his book *Dare we Hope that "All men be saved."* In his book he presents this argument. God desires that all people be saved. God is capable of saving all men. If God's mission is to save all people, then he would fail at his mission if anyone was not saved. In a similar vein he postulates, the joy of Heaven is to be reunited with all the people we once loved. Heaven would be less joyful if anyone that we loved was not in Heaven. Therefore the people of Heaven would not rejoice to see anyone condemned to Hell. Thus, in order to enjoy the joys of Heaven all people must be saved. Von Balthasar concludes that all people must be saved. Therefore we have no reason to hope since it must be the case.

The common rebuke of Von Balthasar's conclusion center on the idea of judgment and personal autonomy. God's judgement is just. As Scripture says well, mercy triumphs over judgement. Therefore our final judgement is not as much about our sins or failing but on desiring God. Those who desire Heaven will recognize their failing and desire God's mercy, which will be granted to them. I will talk more about this point in the next section on purgatory. On the other side of this issue, God respects the choice of the person undergoing judgement. If the person does not want salvation or does not want to be saved, then God will respect the desires of that person. God does not want someone who would be tormented being in Heaven. Yet, the consequence of this decision is not that the person will suddenly cease to exist but that the person will eternally exist in the state of God constantly loving him or her but the person does not wish to be loved.

Purgatory:

Purgatory is the state of God's judgement. Throughout Scripture God is clear that he will avenge the wrong deeds of the people; no deed will go unpunished. As I mentioned in the previous paragraph, God's mercy triumphs over his judgement. Since the punishment due to our crimes are huge, God fills in the gap of the punishment for us. Think of it this way. What punishment would be just for a person who murdered the mother of a family? 40 years in jail? Life-sentence? What is considered just? I don't think we can answer this question. The pain and suffering that afflicts the family and the taking of a human life warrants a punishment that no one could ever satisfy. The same idea works for God's judgment. He knows that we cannot make satisfaction (do something that makes up for the criminal activity) for our misdeeds. Therefore he allowed his son, Jesus, to make up for all our crimes. This does not remove the opportunity for us to participate in making satisfaction for our crimes. Purgatory is that state in which we are being purified. In purgatory the person is making some form of satisfaction for the crimes they committed. This is an act of justice. Since God is just, a true act of justice is not overlooking the criminal activity. Mercy is the overlooking of the criminal activity. Justice is finding a way to restore or make up for the damage done by the crime. Since God's mercy triumphs over his justice, we do something in reparation for the damages but we do not have to suffer the full penalty of the crime. We, however, should do something to feel the effects of our crimes, even if

we can't make full satisfaction. This reduced satisfaction for the damages done could either be a form of penance during this life or a form of penance as we prepare for Heaven, hence, purgatory.

Did Jesus descend into Hell?

This question has two major aspects that I want to explore: the theological understanding of Jesus and Hell and the words contained in the creed.

The Theological Understanding:

Since Hell is the state of complete rejection of God, Jesus, who is God, cannot be in Hell. Namely, there is no way that Jesus can be in the state we call Hell. If Jesus were to be in Hell, then God has rejected God. This is a contradiction, thus impossible. Therefore it is impossible for Jesus to be in Hell. However, since the people who are in Hell are not outside of the God's love and mercy but have rejected God, Jesus can go to the people who are in Hell and encourage or coax them to changing their stance, i.e. call them to conversion. The difficulty this idea poses is that our decision of whether to accept God's love is a permanent decision made at the final judgement. After the final judgement, anyone in Hell is there for eternity.

What do the words "he descended into Hell" mean?

The Catechism of the Catholic Church is very clear on the meaning of these words:

"The frequent New Testament affirmations that Jesus was 'raised from the dead' presuppose that the crucified one sojourned in the realm of the dead prior to his resurrection. This was the first meaning given in the apostolic preaching to Christ's descent into hell: that Jesus, like all men, experienced death and in his soul joined the others in the realm of the dead. But he descended there as Savior, proclaiming the Good News to the spirits imprisoned there." (CCC 632¹)

The answer to this question is that Jesus didn't become "a member of Hell", he was not one who resided in hell. Instead the statement "he descended into Hell" affirms that he did truly die and he went to preach the Good News to those who were awaiting redemption. These two statements are vitally important for the Christian message. Jesus had to die. He couldn't fall asleep or simply look dead or some weird combination of the two. Jesus had to die in order to be like us who die. The consequence of sin is death. The only way to satisfy the penalty of sin is for him to die. Therefore Jesus needed to die. But death didn't end his preaching of the Good News. God's mercy extends beyond the grave to those who died before Jesus was born. Those who had yet to hear the message are receptive to it, heard the message upon Jesus death that all may be saved. The statement in the Apostle's Creed is meant to affirm that Jesus did die as humans die.

¹ The Catechism of the Catholic Church has its own system of citation. The number in brackets is the paragraph number not the page number.