

“Why Did Jesus Have to Go to Hell After He Died?”

At a family picnic, my niece asked a very good question that had us all puzzled.

When reciting the Apostolic Creed, we say “...and suffered under Pontius Pilate...was crucified, died and was buried. He descended into hell. On the third day He rose again and ascended into heaven.” My niece asked, “Why did Jesus have to go through hell too...what was the point of that? Didn’t Jesus defy the devil right here on earth ... why did he have to go through hell upon death?”

I am embarrassed to have to write and ask you (and yes, I am even more embarrassed to go to my pastor and look him in the eye and ask him directly...because I feel I “should” know this answer. I guess I was sleeping somewhere along the line...I’ve been searching in my Bible and Bible commentary, but cannot find a “real” answer.) Thanks for your help!

Great question! There is still a lot of discussion about what that phrase meant to those who inserted it into the Creed, and what it means today.

First, we need to make a distinction between the Apostles’ Creed and scripture. Scripture is inspired; the creed, while based on scripture, is not. Secondly, you may be surprised to learn (as was I) that the Apostles’ Creed does not date back to the time of the apostles, but was a “work in progress,” developing gradually from about A.D. 200 to 750. Before 650, the phrase “descended into hell” only appeared in one version of the creed, in 390, written by a man who understood it to mean simply that Christ was buried—He “descended into the grave.” (Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine*, p. 174)

In defending this part of the creed, these scriptures have been offered:

Acts 2:31 (KJV) He seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ, that **his soul was not left in hell**, neither his flesh did see corruption.

The problem is that the Greek word translated in the KJV “hell” is actually “Hades,” which means “the place of the dead.” The word that definitively refers to hell, “gehenna,” isn’t used here.

1 Pet 3:18-19 For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; in which also He went and **made proclamation to the spirits now in prison...**

The context indicates that the “spirits in prison” may have been disobedient demons from Noah’s time, to whom Jesus went and made proclamation—what, we’re not told. The Greek word for preached means “proclaimed,” not evangelized. This may well indicate that He visited the demons in their holding cells after His death, but that’s not the same thing as experiencing hell after His death.

When we look at what the scripture says about where Jesus went after his death, what we see is:

1. He told the thief on the cross, "Today you will be with me in paradise." After His death, Jesus knew He would be in heaven and see the repentant and newly converted thief there.
2. Some of His last words on the cross were, "It is finished." He had already suffered hell—separation from his Father—while hanging on the cross. His work was over and so was the torment of being under the Father's wrath and alienation.
3. Just before dying, He said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit," indicating that He expected the Father to receive Him when he died.

There is clearly a mystery here, in view of the 1 Peter passage, and I don't think any of us will figure it out this side of heaven.

So, what I would say to your niece is, "Jesus didn't have to go to hell, and He didn't suffer anymore in hell (or any other place) after He died, but it seems that He visited it to make a point to the demons there."

Hope this helps!

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