

In the Name JESUS. [Amen]

In all three Ecumenical Creeds of the Church, we confess Christ's *Descent into Hell*. But that *Descent* was not into torment. Christ your dear Savior had already paid for your sins on the cross. That is why Jesus could say, ***It is finished*** [JN 19.30]. His greatest agony is expressed in the words, ***My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*** [MT 27.46] In quoting PSALM 22, our Savior emphasizes just how serious God views our sins. God the Father made Jesus, ***Who knew no sin, to be sin for us*** [2COR 5.21]. Then He punished that sin with all the force of His almighty, holy wrath. Being abandoned by God is the greatest torment that even hell has to offer; yet Jesus willingly accepted this to reconcile us with His Father.

In his first epistle, St. Peter directly addresses the Savior's *Descent into Hell* – and ties the topic to *Holy Baptism*. ***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, in which 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, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, Who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to Him.*** [1PET 3.18-22] From this we learn that Jesus apparently was alive but not yet out of the grave when His *Descent* occurred. He used this time to proclaim His victory in the heart of satan's domain.

Note Peter's divinely inspired emphasis here. It is not so much our Savior's *Descent into Hell*, but *Holy Baptism* that the Holy Spirit emphasizes. Just as water saved Noah's family in the Flood while drowning the unbelieving evildoers, so the water of *Holy Baptism* saves us by joining us to the death and especially the resurrection of Jesus Christ. [*cf.* ROM 6]

Paul also alludes to our Lord's *Descent into Hell* when he writes: ***Having disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, triumphing over them by the cross.*** [COL 2.15] Ah ... here, then, is the connection of our *Baptism* to Jesus' *Descent into Hell*. Jesus has triumphed over sin, death, devil, and hell by His Cross ... and Resurrection. And He applies that triumph **to you** through the waters of *Holy Baptism*.

In one of his sermons, Luther describes our Savior's *Descent* as His triumphant march into the stronghold of the now-confused hosts of hell. Jesus descended into hell, body and soul, **not** to complete His suffering and atoning sacrifice, but as Jesus Christ the Victor.

Before He rose from the grave and ascended into heaven, while still lying in the tomb, Jesus also descended into hell in order to deliver us also from it. For, because of our sins, we were to be held in it as prisoners ... eternally. But now, for the sake of Christ ... and because of our Baptism into Christ, we are co-victors with our Lord. He has made His victory our own through Holy Baptism.

We need not – indeed, must not – attempt to investigate this *Descent into Hell* in some profound and subtle manner. Holy Scripture does not. Thus, we cannot. We simply confess the truth, and take comfort in the certain knowledge that Christ our Savior has won the decisive victory for us.

Since Jesus Christ **is** the Victor also over hell and all devils, our Lord is often represented in paintings of His resurrection dressed in a priestly robe of some sort, victory banner in His hand. In some paintings we see our Savior crash the gates of Hell, using this banner to beat and overpower the devil, before He rescues those that are His.

Consider the icon on the front of our Vigil folder. Although there is no banner here, we see Christ in a priestly white robe. He has crashed the gates of hell. He has bound the strong man, satan [MT 12.29]. And He is pulling Adam and Eve out of the grave – symbolizing that our Lord, by His victorious Resurrection from the tomb, has freed all believers – **including you** – from sin, death, devil, and hell.

There is much that we simply cannot conceive and understand in this matter. How it is that the One, undivided Christ, true God and true Man, can be both in the grave and in hell ... yet not remain in it – that we cannot understand or explain. But that it is so, we simply believe according to the Scriptures. Christ descended and proclaimed to the spirits in prison – as the Scripture says. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame – as the Scripture says. Yet His soul (and whole Person) were not abandoned to hell ... the Holy One did not see corruption – just as the Scripture says [PSA 16.10].

This, then, is the plainest way to speak of and think of this article of faith. For us, through **Christ our Victor**, hell has been torn to pieces and the devil's kingdom and power have been destroyed utterly. It is for this purpose that the Son of God died, was buried, and descended into hell – so that sin, death, devil, and hell should no longer harm or overwhelm us – as Christ our dear Lord says [MT 16.18].

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. [Amen]

Christ's Descent into Hell - and Holy Baptism

