

**“Suffering Servant and Descended into Hell”**  
**Combined Sermons**  
**1 Peter 2:22-25**

What does the creed mean when it says, “He descended into Hell?” Many people are confused, for they understand hell to be the place of eternal punishment for sin. Does it mean that that is where Jesus went? No, it is declaring that He went to what the Hebrews refer to *Sheol*, or what the Greeks referred to as *Hades*, which literally means “the land of the dead” or “the place of the departed spirits.” If the New Testament wishes to express the place of punishment, it uses the word *Gehenna*, which literally refers to the Valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem. It was the valley that in the ancient days those who worshiped the pagan god Moloch, the fire god, had burned their children as an offering to this false deity. It ultimately became the official dump, the public incinerator of Jerusalem. It smoldered continuously. That terrible valley, a kind of valley of destruction, stood as the popular idea of hell.

These two words are quite different. When The Apostles’ Creed declares that Jesus “. . . descended into hell . . .,” it is trying to make a clear statement that Jesus literally died. In fact, it is a double statement, for already it says He was “crucified, dead, and buried.” If that were not enough, it goes on to say that He descended into the land of the dead, not to the place of final eternal punishment. The Early Church wanted to make clear that Jesus really died. There were those who, for various reasons, held to what is known as the “swoon theory.” They held that Jesus didn’t really die. He fainted, but the coolness of the tomb revived Him. Part of His work on the cross was to die. That is the main reason for this double statement of both His death and His descent into hell.

Some Bible scholars speculate that He may have, in that situation, actually preached to the departed spirits, proclaiming to those who lived in the Old Testament anticipation of the coming Messiah what He had accomplished on the cross. There are some who even speculate that Jesus went to the place of departed spirits to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles who had never heard. I am not prepared to make a definitive comment on those speculative theories. What I am prepared to say is that Jesus literally died. That is the primary meaning.

“I believe in Jesus Christ . . . suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried.” *Christ's death on the cross is central to everything taught in the New Testament.* The cross is a familiar symbol in our culture. (Accident – lady with

cross). But what many in our culture find offensive is the necessity of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The fact is that the death of Jesus Christ on the cross underlines the “uniqueness” of Christianity. God has done for us what we cannot do for ourselves. He has provided a way for us as sinners to be forgiven and to have a vital relationship with Him. Let’s look briefly at some of the references made in the New Testament to the death of Jesus Christ and the necessity of the cross. I could mention many words, which underline the importance of what happened on the cross, but I would like to highlight just three: Atonement, Substitute, and Reconciliation. Atonement means a bringing together of those who are estranged. In the Old Testament, the word atonement means literally “to cover.” The animal sacrifices provided a “covering” for sin until the death of Jesus Christ would forever destroy sin’s power. The author of Hebrews captures both the Old and New Testament understanding when he writes in Hebrews 9:22, “Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.”

Some have said that the basic meaning of atonement is “at-one-ment” – the bringing together of those who are estranged. John the Baptist understood this about Jesus. We read in John 1:29, John saw Jesus coming toward him, and he declared, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!’” Jesus provided the perfect atonement, rendering sacrifices of a Passover lamb as no longer necessary. He was the true Passover Lamb. With His death on the cross, the veil of the temple was ripped apart, and you and I are given the same access to the Holy of Holies, which was reserved only for the High Priest on the Day of Atonement. Another phrase used throughout the New Testament is the word *substitute*. This may be one of the clearest explanations of the death of Jesus Christ. Paul wrote to the Church at Corinth in 1 Corinthians 5:21, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

This is what is meant by “substitutionary atonement.” In fact, that is the bottom line of our text for today, we read in verse 24: “He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.” For example, just imagine that a man was sentenced to pay a large fine and serve a prison sentence for a crime he had committed. If the judge was his friend and loved him so much that he took off his robe and served the sentence for the man, he would be his substitute. The man would go free – uncondemned. The weight of his sentence would be on his friend, the judge. That is what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Jesus is our substitute. He has taken our place.

Another word used throughout the New Testament is the word *reconciliation*. Time after time, we are shown to be enemies with God, hostile parties to God. Sin separates us from the Holy God. Jesus is described in these terms in Luke 19:10: “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.” God is in the business of reconciliation. God loves you and me so much. He yearns for us to function in full open relationship with each other. Jesus elaborated on this in that magnificent parable He told of the Prodigal Son. It is really the Parable of the Waiting, Loving Father, isn’t it? The father had his heart broken by the son who disgraced him publicly by demanding his part of the inheritance, which he promptly took, left home, went to a far country and spent it on wine, women and song. Did the father write him off? No. The father loved him. The father kept his eyes on the horizon, hoping his son would come back. When he did, he didn’t give him a lecture. He shocked the rebel son by throwing a party in his honor. And this same father yearned for reconciliation with his other son, the self-righteous young son who had done things the right way. He was jealous of his prodigal brother. He had some lessons to learn about what it is to be in fellowship with the Father, even while basically doing the right things.

Theologians refer to these as various words of what happened on the cross as “theories of the atonement,” such as the substitutionary atonement theory and the ransom theory, etc. I am convinced that out of the richness of these metaphors and images, we begin to get a sense of what God was doing on our behalf on the cross. The bottom-line truth is: *We can't do it ourselves*. Isaiah 64:6 declares, “All our righteous deeds are like filthy rags.” In Romans 3:22-23, Paul tells us, “. . . For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God . . . .” Every other religious system is a “do-it-yourself” proposition, except for historic Christianity that says we can’t do it ourselves. *God has done it for us*.

John 3:16-18 states it so clearly: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.” So we come back to our text, 1 Peter 2:24, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.” *The cross of Jesus Christ is the central event of all history – the vehicle of God’s grace!* God has acted on our behalf. He offers His grace, freely given. It is His gift to us. All we need to do is repent and put our trust in Him alone for salvation. Have you done it? If so, celebrate. If you haven’t, open your life to Him today. That is what is so amazing

about grace. It is God's unmerited favor, acceptance, and reconciliation, offered freely. Christ's atoning work on the cross!