

Psalm 139:7-12, Ephesians 4:7-10, I Peter 3:17-20
“To Hell and Back”

Let's bring ourselves up to speed. Where are we: I believe, in God the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth, and in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified dead and buried. Today: He descended into hell. Some theologians have called this part of the Apostles' Creed: “a plant that the Lord had not planted.” On Friday at a funeral service during the Apostles' Creed they said descended into the dead. I remember as a kid loving being able to say that word in church out loud, in fact my brothers and I would say it quite loudly because it was the only time we were allowed to.

It is hard to imagine the reason or even how our Savior could actually have descended into hell. How could the one who knew no sin, who was perfect in every way, go to a place that is the antithesis of who he is and what he stands for? One thing we need to keep in mind is that this creed is based completely upon Scripture, there is nothing made up from thin air but rather every thought and concept is reflected in our Scriptures. This is true especially of this phrase. We find in Scripture God's presence in heaven, and in earth and even under the earth.

A key understanding to what we believe is the fact that God loved us even before we were able to love God. No matter what happens, no matter how far we try to run from God, God's love will pursue us until we give in to God. Our Savior's descent into Hell proves the extremes to which God will go in order to show us his love for us. Let's look at a couple of Scriptures that prove that.

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When I was in Prague, Czechoslovakia for the summer of 92 I visited the Jewish ghetto there. It was a haunting trip that I will never forget. The cemetery had tombstones stacked on top of each other because in the 30's and 40's the people were not able to leave their tiny space in the city. They had a children's museum there with drawings and photographs taken of kids that was unforgettable. There was a picture of a line of women and children standing in line getting ready to enter the gas chambers and there is a little girl with her mother in line and the mother has her hand over her daughters eyes trying to somehow shield her and protect her from the horror that was about to come and that she could witness. When I think of a situation that most closely defines for me hell on earth I

think of that ghetto, of that photograph and how that mother is trying with all of the means at her disposal to spare her child from that.

But what is hell? Is it a humanistic reality on this earth where we feel that things are so bad and they can't get any worse. I know at times we feel that way, but that is not what I mean and it certainly is not what Scripture means when it describes hell. Let me give you a little etymological history to the word hell. It comes from the name of a Norse Goddess of the underworld who was named Hel. This is how we get the word in English. We haven't borrowed it from the Bible but rather from Norwegian mythology.

Now Scripture has at least three different words to describe hell. The first is Sheol which is from the Old Testament and is a Hebrew word which describes the place where the dead reside. For example the Sheol that we read about in Psalm 139. We read in Proverbs 9:18 "They do not know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of Sheol." In the Old Testament Sheol holds no value judgment. It is not the place that bad people go, just all dead people.

In the New Testament we have two words that work for us Hades and Gehenna. These words are used most often to describe what we commonly understand hell to be today. It is a literal place where people who commit evil are sent and there is usually a description of fire, a lot of weeping, and some gnashing of teeth. Matthew 5:22 tells us: "If you say 'you fool' you will be liable to the hell of fire. And then in Luke 16:23 "In Hades, where he was being tormented...he called out ... I am in agony in these flames."

The question that we must raise after last weeks' creedal phrase: suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried, is why in the world would he need to descend into hell. Isn't it enough that he died, actually died and was buried. Apparently not.

You see all throughout Scripture God gives us a promise that runs like a red thread from the Old Testament through the New Testament. That promise is seen in the covenants that he makes with us. And the gist of that promise is that God will never, ever leave or forsake us. God will always seek us out no matter where we go and no matter what we do, no matter what we are involved in God will literally go to hell and bring us back, and he has.

Psalm 139 gives us this promise by asking us a question. Where can I go from your Spirit, or where can I flee from your presence. Now this is a question asked by someone who seems as if they are trying hard to get away from God. But the psalmist realizes it is impossible. If I go to heaven, you are there. If I go to Sheol, to hell, you are there. God is in hell? Yes, God is calling his children to him, even in hell. Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling, calling for you and for me, see on the portals he's waiting and watching, watching for you and for me. Come home, come home, you who are weary come home. Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling, calling O sinner come home.

The psalm goes on and states even if I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your right hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. Who sailed to the farthest reaches of the sea? Jonah did of course. Jonah ran, hid himself, tried to escape from God by doing just that. But God found him. What we find in Scripture is this common theme that God's loving presence is a constant, it is relentless. What we also find in Scripture is we see those who run from God's presence end up hurting themselves and those around them as they try to escape from God for their own selfish motives. The more we try to escape from God, the more we find ourselves sinking into a hell that we cannot get out of until God rescues us. How many of us have made bad choices, bad decisions serious mistakes and we think we have no way out, but the good news of psalm 139 is that God will track you down and claim you, and save you from your hell through the blood of Jesus Christ on the cross. Why should we tarry when Jesus is pleading, pleading for you and for me? Why should we linger and heed not his mercies, mercies for you and for me? Come home, come home, you who are weary come home. Earnestly and tenderly, Jesus is calling, calling O sinner, come home.

We have been talking about how God is able to save us from a living hell, but what about the dying hell that we confess to in the Apostles' Creed and what we find in Scripture. Ephesians tells us that Christ visited the lowest parts of the earth. Now he's not talking about the Southern End. Is it a physical place on this earth?

No what Ephesians tells us fits in exactly with what we find in the Apostle's Creed. Between Good Friday and Easter Sunday our Savior had a lot of work to do. Some of his work entailed going to hell and give the Good News of salvation to those

who did not get a chance to hear it. Basically, when Christ was crucified and he died, it was an opportunity for every single person to get a second chance. Christ had to go down to gather his children before he could go up and celebrate his victory. Christ doesn't like half-victories, and only with those in hell by his side could we truly say that Christ has conquered death and holds the keys to heaven and hell.

Now II Peter takes it even a step farther. This is really from where our church fathers got this phrase of the creed. We hear Jesus visits those in prison and he specifies the righteous and the unrighteous. What this tells me is that everyone good, bad and what not got a second chance to accept Christ.

Now if Christ went to hell and back and came back with those left over in hell, how do we explain the Scriptures in Romans 8:38 which tells us: for I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Nothing can separate from Christ, not even hell.

Christ went to hell and back in order to save us from our sins. It is time to give up our fighting, our running away and give ourselves to him because he will not give up. We cause so much damage to ourselves and to our families as we run away from God. O for the wonderful love he has promised, promised for you and for me. Though we have sinned, he has mercy and pardon, pardon for you and for me. Come home, come home, you who are weary, come home. Earnestly, tenderly Jesus is calling, calling O sinner come home.