

The Church Fathers on the Soteriological Significance of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ's Descent into Hell



Religion

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ABSTRACT

Christ, as a victorious Emperor who vanquished death, sin, hell and the devil, descended into hell, with His deified soul or with His soul unified with God, unbinding and releasing from it those who were wrongly kept there. This action was accomplished after the Crucifixion and the laying of Christ's body in the tomb. This lasted "three days and three nights" until His Resurrection. The "persons" to whom He conveyed the message of redemption were the souls of the dead since Adam to that moment, but not all of them experienced the redeeming effects of Christ's sacrifice and the message He took there, only the righteous and the virtuous.

Our Lord Jesus Christ calls His death "a sacrifice" and asserts this is what He has come for, to sacrifice (Matt. 20:28). He did not refuse this sacrifice even if this would have been for one single man, as He loves each of us the most. "Christ loves each and every man as he loves the entire world," (Crysostomos, 1862, col. 647) as every man is unparalleled before God and more valuable than all the galaxies, as man is the only one who was created in His own Image and Likeness, benefitting of the possibility to resemble Him and possess through Grace what He has by nature; man also represents the connection between creation and God, "as in the man's nature mingled a certain congeniality with God." (Gregory of Nyssa, 1863, col. 25D) The absolute scope of the redeeming effort is man's bliss, accomplished by the Resurrection of Christ from the dead.

Christ the Saviour's Descent into Hell

The Saviour's Descent into hell is referenced in St. Peter, who states in his First Epistle: "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit by Whom He also went and preached to the spirits in prison" (I Pt. 3:18-19).

The teaching about our Lord Christ's descent into hell to those kept until that moment and those under the rule of the devil, the former being preached the Gospel, is mentioned in the 5th article of the Apostolic Creed and in the Athanasian Creed, as well as in all the Creeds of the Orthodox Church. The Orthodox Creed underlines that, even if from Friday evening until dawn on Sunday, the holy body of Jesus stayed in the tomb, all this time it was in the same hypostasis as the soul, that had descended into death, as God does not obey the rules of space and thus being present everywhere simultaneously. The hypostasis of the Logos thus ensured the connection between the body and the soul, even if for a while the two elements of the Person of Christ were separated. This dogmatic truth was adopted by the Orthodox liturgical rite. Thus, at the end of the Proskomedia, as well as on the Great Entrance, the Priest utters in silent prayer: "In the grave bodily, but in hades with Thy soul as God; in Paradise with the thief and on the throne with the Father and the Spirit wast Thou Who fillest all things O Christ, the Inexpressible." (St. John Crystostomos' Liturgy, 2012, p. 165) Then, on the Matins of Resurrection we sing: "In hell, in the tomb and in Eden, with the Father and the Spirit, the divinity of Christ was one and undivided for the salvation of us who sing: Blessed are You, O God, our Redeemer!" (Penticostarul..., 2012, p. 11)

This Descent of Christ into hell with His deified soul or with the soul united with God, occurred immediately after the Crucifixion and the deposition of our Lord Christ in the tomb, during the three days and three nights that He

stayed in the body in the tomb, between crucifixion and resurrection (Matt. 16:21). The Saviour talked about this period of time: "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matt. 12:40).

Saint Cyril of Alexandria, starting from the text of St. Peter mentioned above (I Pt. 3:18-19), states: "Christ's body, that has been unified with the Logos descended into hell; and making use of His divine power and the divine mastery revealed Himself to the souls there. (...) The Logos, going there, talked to the dead souls in that prison (hell), as a soul talks to another soul. What I say is not that the Divinity itself and by itself of the One Born of God descended into hades and preached to those there, completely separated from the body. As the body is beyond sight (...) as the One Born spent time with those who were alive in their bodies, the same way His soul talked to the souls in hell (unified with the Divinity), having His own vestment." (Cyril of Alexandria, 1859, col. 1165)

As it is generally known, the Scripture (Lk. 16:22-31) teaches us that the soul, being immortal, keeps after its departure from the body all its characteristics, thus continuing its life in the after world. Until Christ's descent into hell, the souls of the dead – both of the righteous and the sinners – since Adam and until that moment, had been going to the same "place", called by the Apostle Peter "prison", and by the Church Fathers and theologians, in general, "hades" or "hell". As Paradise had been closed, and the righteous had not been unbound from the original sin, they were in this "prison", "empire of death", with various chasms (Lk. 16:30-31) as in Heaven "in Father's house there are many rooms" (Jn. 14:2). However, even the souls of the righteous were kept there in darkness, that was not causing them great torment, they were not punished, as the souls of the sinners suffered *penalty*. The souls of the righteous were permeated by inner peace and the hope in God's Resurrection (Heb. 11:35-40).

The Church Fathers unanimously testify to the fact that the Saviour descended into hell and communicated the message of redemption to the souls of the dead since Adam and until then "to the spirits in prison" (I Pt. 3:19). Christ brought the good news to all the souls, since Adam till the coming of God, in conclusion not only to those in the Old Testament, who had fulfilled God's will, but also to the peoples and pagans (Matt. 8:10). "Bringing into hell the word of faith, Christ extended His grace to the whole of nature." (Cyril of Alexandria, 1864, col. 605D) God descended into hell with His soul, to let them know of the fulfillment of the messianic prophecies, the beginning of the fall of the devil and death's power (Eph. 4:9; I Pt. 3:18-20; 4:6) and

to reveal Himself to those who did not trust His coming and rejected Him. Declaring His victory over death and the shattering of the hell's power, the kontakion on the Easter Sunday, written by St. John of Damascus cries about this truth: "You descended into the tomb, the One who is not subject to death, You shattered the power of death and resurrected like a victor, O Christ victor, telling to the chrism-bearing women: Rejoice! And bestowing peace to the Apostles, the One who raises the fallen." (*Penticostarul...*, 2012, p. 128)

Although all awaiting the message – both the righteous and sinners (the former in Abraham's Bosom and the latter in Hades) – found out about His Advent and His redeeming activity, as well as about His preaching there, not everybody could benefit from it, only the righteous. The Gospels, when mentioning the righteous, as we stated above – do not refer exclusively to those in the Old Testament that fulfilled God's will, as Christ extends the category of the righteous to those living in the whole world, including the *peoples* or the pagans, who, even if they do not observe the law, by nature do according to the Law's provisions (Rom. 2:14). The latter, although they do not know God and have never heard about Messiah, worked on improving the natural virtues: faith, justice, wisdom, courage and strength of character, restraint and morality, mercy, cleanness of heart, etc.; they responded positively to "natural revelation" (Ps. 19:1). The rule of death has been shattered by Christ's body that became immortal. Yet, this does not mean that all those who died before his coming were exempted from sin. About this, St. Cyril of Alexandria mentions: "Christ, going with His soul in hell talked like a soul to souls; and hell's gatekeepers seeing Him were frightened and the copper gates were shattered and the iron locks were broken. And the One Born cried to the souls that were enduring suffering: «Come out» (...) and brought to them the news so that those who could have believed could come out, if they He had come into a body before and He had lived during his life." (Cyril of Alexandria, 1863, col. 1013) Further on, the patristic author explains and clarifies for those who have not been released from hell, but only a part of them, the righteous: "do, as through his coming into body, Christ talked to the living and those who believed took good benefit, so that by His descent to hell, He released from the ties of death only those who would have believed and believed in Him. As the souls of those who had lived in idolatry and in lusty pleasures as blinded by their bodily desire, could not look at the brightness of His coming. This is why they could not recognize truly the One that has freed them all (the righteous) and Who preached there to all, with His love for humankind, but also practicing justice. As those who got away from this kind of benefaction could realize themselves they abandoned the Creator and the Lord of humankind and served the man hating devils, as they spent their lives not obeying God's will." (Cyril of Alexandria, 1863, col. 1013) In his *Homily on Holy Saturday*, St. John of Damascus shows briefly and clearly who benefited from this descent of the Lord into hell. "From where I stand, only those who lived a righteous life benefited from His redeeming kindness, those who practiced modesty, restraint and chastity, without receiving the light of faith. Those, God, who covers everyone in His Providence, attracted to Him; and beaming on them His divine light, took them in His divine fishing net, allowing them to believe in Him. As He, the merciful One could not tolerate that their effort has been in vain." (*Cazanii...*, 1911, p. 69)

Christ descends into hell as an Emperor, a Victor, He decries the victory over death and the devil and sets free the righteous. Paradise, "the forefather and the fathers' home-

land, has been closed to everyone, after Adam's fall. Now Jesus is opening it, together with the thief, who is the first to enter the Kingdom of Heaven." (Augustin, 1863, col. 2045) So, the Lord has opened Paradise for us again and for us He restored to humankind the eternal dwelling. (Augustin, 1863, col. 2048) Thus, the righteous have been taken out, through the intermediary of God's Resurrection, from "the darkness and the shadow of death" (Ps. 106:10) and brought into the light, to rejoice, with peace and the blessing of the now-opened Paradise.

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