

## Why Christ's Descent into Hell Matters to Christians

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Holy Saturday is overshadowed by the visible drama of Christ's crucifixion on Good Friday and His resurrection on Easter Sunday. What is the significance of this day, when all the world is holding its breath? How can we approach a mystery to which there were no living witnesses? Does it have continuing significance for our lives and, if so, what? Addressing these questions from the perspective of the ancient universal Christian tradition, we will find that Christ's descent into hell is as rich and meaningful a mystery of faith as the other aspects of Jesus' life and death. It has great potential to enrich our appreciation of what He has done for our salvation, to serve as material for meditation and prayer, and to strength our Christian hope and zeal in a world ever in need of the Gospel.

- I. Introduction: Christ descended *where*?!
  - a. Summary of the traditional Christian doctrine
  - b. Scripture and Tradition on the Descent
    - i. Relevance, relation
    - ii. Examples
      1. In Scripture: So much to choose from!
      2. In Tradition
        - a. Creeds
        - b. Art of the Christian East and West
        - c. Liturgy
- II. The continuing significance of Christ's descent
  - a. Christ: True man and true God
    - i. The Incarnation
    - ii. The work of Christ
    - iii. His love
      1. Fidelity
      2. Extravagance
      3. Eagerness
  - b. Baptism as a participation in Christ's descent
  - c. The trans-temporal community of the Church
  - d. The Christian situation in expectation of the Second Coming
- III. Conclusion: The Descent as compact synopsis of the paschal mystery
  - a. As historical fact
  - b. As the continuing form of Christian life
  - c. As good news for a world enslaved to death

***Recommended Reading:*** Rufinus, *A Commentary on the Apostles' Creed*, trans. W.H. Fremantle. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 2nd ser. Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1979); St. Thomas Aquinas, *The Sermon-Conferences of St. Thomas Aquinas on the Apostles' Creed*, trans. from Leonine edition and edited by Nicholas Ayo (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988); St. Cyril of Jerusalem, "On the Ten Doctrines," *The Works of St. Cyril of Jerusalem*, Vol. 1, trans. Leo P. McCauley and Anthony A. Stephenson. The Fathers of the Church 61 (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1969); *About the Harrowing of Hell: A Seventeenth-Century Ukrainian Play in its European Context*, trans. with introduction and notes by Irena R. Makaryk (Ottawa: Dovehouse Editions Canada, 1989); J.A. MacCulloch, *The Harrowing of Hell: A Comparative Study of an Early Christian Doctrine* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1930); *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, revised ed. (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1999); *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, trans. John A. McHugh and Charles J. Callan (New York: Joseph F. Wagner, 1923); Pope John Paul II, "He Descended into Hell," General Audience, January 11, 1989. Look also for patristic and medieval commentaries on the creed.

**For Scholarly Types:**

- Chaine, J. "Descente du Christ aux Enfers," in *Dictionnaire de la Bible Supplément*, 1934 edition: 395-431.
- Cooper, Alan. "Ps 24:7-10: Mythology and Exegesis," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 102 (1983) 1: 37-60.
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- Dölger, F.J. *Sol Salutis*, 3. Auflage. Liturgiewissenschaftliche Quellen und Forschungen Heft 16/17. Munster: Aschendorff, 1972.
- Grillmeier, Alois. "Der Gottessohn im Totenreich: Soteriologische und christologische Motivierung der Descensuslehre in der älteren christlichen Überlieferung," *Mit ihm und in ihm: Christologische Forschungen und Perspektiven*, 2. Auflage, 76-174. Freiburg: Herder, 1975.
- Herzog, Markwart. "Descensus ad inferos": *Eine religionsphilosophische Untersuchung der Motive und Interpretationen mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der monographischen Literatur seit dem 16. Jahrhundert*. Frankfurter Theologische Studien 53. Frankfurt: Josef Knecht, 1997.
- Lundberg, Per. *La typologie baptismale dans l'ancienne Eglise*. Acta Seminarii Neotestamentici Upsaliensis 10. Leipzig: Alfred Lorentz, 1942.
- Pseudo-Epiphanius. Sancto et magno Sabbato. PG 43:439A-464D.
- Quillet, H. "Descente de Jésus aux enfers," in *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*, 1939 edition: 565-619.
- Rousseau, Olivier. "La Descente aux Enfers. Fondement Sotériologique du Baptême Chrétien," *Mélanges Jules Lebreton II. Recherches de Science Religieuse* 40 (1951-52): 273-97.