

The Significance and Result of Christ's Suffering and Death on the Cross

A Discussion of Lord's Day 16 of 'The Heidelberg Catechism'

1. The Significance of Christ's Death and Burial

- a. *Scriptural Support for Understanding: Matthew 27:50-60; Romans 3:21-26; 6:20-23*
- b. *Lord's Day 16 Q. & A. 40 & 41*
 - i. DeYoung – "Jesus Christ died for our sins. God's justice demanded it, and His burial testifies to it. Jesus did not swoon or slip into a coma or fall asleep on the cross. He died – stone-cold dead and buried. Death is our entrance into eternal life [and it also] puts an end to our sinning."
- c. *Article 2 ("there is one Christ, very God and very man; who truly suffered, was crucified, dead and buried, to reconcile His Father to us, and be a sacrifice, not only for original guilt, but also for all actual sins of man")*
 - i. Rodgers – "...the Cross made it clear that [Jesus] is the Divine Son Who came from above to seek and save the lost."
- d. By Christ's death, we are set free from the power/reign of sin and law; we are dead to sin/law and alive to God/righteousness. "Christ's death 'on our behalf' frees us not only from the *penalty* of sin [revealed through the Mosaic Law which attests to our condemnation] but from the *power* of sin also [our fallen inclination/desire to sin]" (Moo). Yet, freedom *from* sin is not freedom *to* sin. Grace is liberating and constraining; enabled by the Holy Spirit.

2. The Benefits of Christ's Death for Us to be Received in Faith by Grace

- a. *Scriptural Support for Understanding: 2 Corinthians 5:21* (On the Cross, Jesus displays the fulfillment of the Law in perfectly loving God His Father with an obedience to His will to the point of death and perfectly loving neighbor/enemy in His willingness to die for us who desired His death); **Romans 6:4-14; 7:18-24**
- b. *Lord's Day 16 Q. & A. 42 & 43*
 - i. DeYoung – "Christ's death not only pays for our sins and assures us of sinless eternal life, it also means that our sinful natures have been put to death in this life. Progressive sanctification is built on the atonement. It is only Christ's finished work on the cross that frees us and inspires us to a life of good works, piety, & gratitude."
- c. *Article 11*
 - i. Rodgers – "...saving faith does not arise out of man's effort but comes from God. Saving faith is a response to the prior offer of God in Christ. Apart from the gift of the Gospel, there could be no saving faith. Moreover, saving faith is due to the inner work of the Holy Spirit regenerating the believer's heart and opening him or her to the Gospel. Apart from the gracious regenerating and illuminating work of the Holy Spirit, there would be no saving faith. Saving faith is a gift that accepts a gift. Apart from justification by grace through faith in Christ, there is no peace with God, or with our brothers and sisters in Christ, or our neighbors, or, in the long run, within ourselves."

3. "He descended into Hell"

- a. **Christ's Passion and Suffering on the Cross** (Scripture most clearly attests to this perspective)
 - i. *Scriptural Support for Understanding: Matthew 27:46* (cf. **Psalm 22:1** – Jesus trusts God even in His cry of despair and agony as He is banished from the presence of His Father on the Cross for our sins and rebellion. Jesus cried out this cry for us, so we would not have to. Jesus is our perfect faith for us; cf. **Hebrews 12:1-3**).
 - ii. *Lord's Day 16 Q. & A. 44*
 1. DeYoung – "Jesus 'descended into hell' as He suffered the pain and torment of divine wrath. 'Surely no more terrible abyss can be conceived,' writes Calvin, 'then to feel yourself forsaken and estranged from God; and when you call upon Him and not be heard.' It should be a comfort to us in our torment that there is no hell we can face greater than Christ endured; ...and that there is no one else able to save us from the wrath of God than He who has faced it already."
 2. DeYoung agrees with Ursinus who further articulates this view in his commentary. The position of the article, "He descended into hell", after "He was crucified, dead, and buried" within the Apostles' Creed is not to be understood chronologically but to highlight that Jesus "did not only die a bodily death and was not only buried; but he also suffered in his soul the most extreme torments, and hellish agonies such as all the ungodly shall forever endure. The chief, and heaviest part of the sufferings of Christ is, therefore, correctly placed last, according to the order of the Creed; for it proceeds from the pains of the body to those of the soul, and from the sufferings which are visible to those that are invisible, as it were from the lighter to the heavier" (Ursinus).
- b. **Christ's Human Soul in the Realm of the Dead Between His Death and Resurrection** (appears to support more of what may have been initially intended in this aspect of the Apostles' Creed but has less clear Scriptural support)
 - i. *Scriptural Support for Understanding: Psalm 16:10; Acts 2:23-32* (1 Peter 3:19; 4:6 and Ephesians 4:9 cannot be employed without reservation to support this perspective)
 - ii. *Article 3*

1. Rodgers – “Concerning this 3rd Article, the Latin edition...uses the phrase *ad inferos* [also present in the Latin version of the Apostles’ Creed], which is best translated as ‘to those below’ [or ‘the lower places’]. This would seem to point in the direction of Sheol or the realm of the dead.” Therefore, this Article may simply affirm that, between Christ’s death and resurrection, Jesus declared His complete and final victory over death, sin and Satan on the Cross, to both the saved and condemned; making Sheol a Paradise and place of rest for the saved. *This understanding of Article 3 is not in contradiction to His suffering Gehenna (‘hell’) on the Cross as the eternal punishment we deserve on our behalf.*
2. Rodgers appears to lean toward Griffith Thomas’ perspective when considering this Article. Thomas highlights that *hell* is an English word that literally means an “unseen” or a “covered” place and is derived from the Anglo-Saxon word *hellan* which meant “to cover.” The word *hell* is the equivalent of both the Greek word *Hades* which corresponds to the Hebrew *Sheol* denoting “the underworld” or “the unseen world”. This appears to be the meaning behind the word “hell” in the Apostles’ Creed. Hell, thus understood, means a place for the departed spirits without reference to their personal character. Hell, in this sense, is the place of the dead (*ref.* Heiser’s study on Sheol and its usage throughout the Old Testament).
 - a. A distinct use of the word “hell” that should not be confused with the aforementioned is in reference to the final abode of the ungodly resulting in eternal punishment which corresponds to the Greek word “*Gehenna*” which is derived from the Hebrew word meaning “the Valley (of the sons) of Hinnom.” This imagery is associated with apocalyptic writings that developed within the inter-testamental (Second Temple) period and was popular during and after the time of Christ’s earthly ministry. Hell, understood here as *Gehenna*, refers to the place of eternal punishment for the unrighteous condemned which would be proleptically experienced during the intermediate state between bodily death and bodily resurrection.
- iii. The statement “*He descended into hell*”, which is excluded in some of the earlier forms of the Apostle’s Creed, may simply affirm that Jesus’ soul went to the place of the dead; that He experienced what humans experience in death. Therefore, the reference to “hell” in the Apostles’ Creed may allude to Christ’s oneness with humanity at/in death.
 1. Christ’s words, “*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit*” and, to the penitent thief, “*Today, you will be with me in Paradise*” could allude to an understanding that Christ’s death changed the “geography of Sheol” and rendered the intermediate state of the soul as Paradise (awaiting the fullness of Paradise at their hoped-for reunification with their glorious immortal bodies) and a continuing Hell/*Gehenna* (place of the dead and evil spirits) tormenting those souls not in Christ, not redeemed by His death, who anticipate the General Resurrection with fear and trembling; because, after the torment and punishment of the Final Judgment, their current/intermediate death experience will be eternally fulfilled.
- c. “**The Jonah Paradigm**” (can shed light on both perspectives according to Scripture with an analogy that Christ Himself makes in **Matthew 12:40**)
 - i. Smith - In commenting on **Jonah 2** he states, “When Jonah was in the water he felt sure he would die. It was out of the depths of this hell that he cried out to God for help (v. 2). Once awakened, Jonah had a *desire* to pray, but he still felt that God was so far from him that prayer would be impossible. Even a mature believer can feel he has failed so badly that God would have no further interest in him. But Jonah’s despairing thought is not his only one. A battle rages in his soul while he struggles in the water. Faith rises within him, and he says, ‘I’m going to cry out to God; I’m going to put my hope in him’. That is a glorious contradiction of what he had just said about being banished! It is a marvelous statement of faith, and it came out of the battle that was raging in Jonah’s heart, right there in the water. His faith came out of a great struggle between his own feelings of failure and the gracious promises of God. When Jonah looked at himself, he despaired because he knew that he deserved to be banished [from God’s presence]. But then he dared to believe that there is hope in God and that he could find it by looking away from himself and his failures, and fixing his eyes on God and His grace. Faith is exercised by looking away from yourself and your failure, and getting your eyes fixed on that grace and mercy which flow from Jesus Christ, crucified for you.”
 - ii. Jesus endured on the Cross what Jonah did in the water, as expressed in His praying of Psalm 22, yet Jesus’ physically died and His experience was intensely perfect as the One Who is sinless and did not deserve God’s banishment (*ref.* Heb. 12:1-3) which was the ‘hell’ (*Gehenna*; extreme torment of soul which was more severe than His bodily pain and suffering) on the Cross He experienced for us Who deserve such condemnation.
 - iii. Parallels- Jonah: water=hell; fish=God’s deliverance unto rest & Jesus: Cross=hell; tomb=God’s deliverance unto rest. Note that Jonah, while praying in the fish, is looking back on his experience in the water.