

“He Descended into Hell”

From John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, Book II, 16.10-12, English updated.

10. But, apart from the [Apostles'] Creed, we must seek for a surer exposition of Christ's descent to hell. And the word of God furnishes us with one not only pious and holy, but replete with excellent consolation. Nothing had been done if Christ had only endured corporeal [physical] death. In order to interpose between us and God's anger, and satisfy His righteous judgment, it was necessary that He should feel the weight of divine vengeance. From which also it was necessary that He should engage, as it were, at close quarters with the powers of hell and the horrors of eternal death.

We lately quoted from the Prophet [Isaiah], that the “chastisement of our peace was laid upon Him” that He “was bruised for our iniquities,” that He “bore our infirmities;” expressions which intimate, that, like a sponsor and surety for the guilty, and, as it were, subjected to condemnation, He undertook and paid all the penalties which must have been exacted from them, the only exception being, that the pains of death could not hold Him. Hence there is nothing strange in its being said that He descended to hell, seeing He endured the death which is inflicted on the wicked by an angry God.

It is frivolous and ridiculous to object that in this way the order is perverted, it being absurd that an event which preceded burial should be placed after it. But after explaining what Christ endured in the sight of man, the [“Apostles'”] Creed appropriately adds the invisible and incomprehensible judgment which He endured before God, to teach us that not only was the body of Christ given up as the price of redemption, but that there was a greater and more excellent price — that He bore in His soul the tortures of condemned and ruined man.

11. In this sense, Peter says that God raised up Christ, “having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible He should be holden of it” (Acts 2:24). He does not mention death simply, but says that the Son of God endured the pains produced by the curse and wrath of God, the source of death. How small a matter had it been to come forth securely, and as it were in sport to undergo death. Herein was a true proof of boundless mercy, that He shunned not the death He so greatly dreaded. And there can be no doubt that, in the Epistle to the Hebrews, the Apostle means to teach the same thing, when he says that He “was heard in that He feared,” (Hebrews 5:7). Some instead of “feared,” use a term meaning reverence or piety, but how inappropriately, is apparent both from the nature of the thing and the form of expression.

Christ then praying in a loud voice, and with tears, is heard in that He feared, not so as to be exempted from death, but so as not to be swallowed up of it like a sinner, though standing as our representative. And certainly no abyss can be imagined more dreadful than to feel that you are abandoned and forsaken of God, and not heard when you invoke Him, just as if He had conspired your destruction. To such a degree was Christ dejected, that in the depth of His agony He was forced to exclaim, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” The view taken by some, that He here expressed the opinion of others rather than His own conviction, is most improbable; for it is evident that the expression was wrung from the anguish of His inmost soul. We do not, however, insinuate that God was ever hostile to Him or angry with Him. How could He be angry with the beloved Son, with whom His soul was well pleased? or how could He have appeased the Father by His intercession for others if He were hostile to Himself? But this

we say, that He bore the weight of the divine anger, that, smitten and afflicted, He experienced all the signs of an angry and avenging God.

Hence Hilary argues, that to this descent we owe our exemption from death. Nor does he dissent from this view in other passages, as when he says, "The cross, death, hell, are our life." And again, "The Son of God is in hell, but man is brought back to heaven." And why do I quote the testimony of a private writer, when an Apostle asserts the same thing, stating it as one fruit of His victory that He delivered "them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage?" (Hebrews 2:15). He behoved therefore, to conquer the fear which incessantly vexes and agitates the breasts of all mortals; and this He could not do without a contest. Moreover it will shortly appear with greater clearness that His was no common sorrow, was not the result of a trivial cause. Thus by engaging with the power of the devil, the fear of death, and the pains of hell, He gained the victory, and achieved a triumph, so that we now fear not in death those things which our Prince has destroyed.

12. Here some miserable creatures, who, though unlearned, are however impelled more by malice than ignorance, cry out that I am offering an atrocious insult to Christ, because it were most incongruous to hold that He feared for the safety of His soul. And then in harsher terms they urge the calumnious charge that I attribute despair to the Son of God, a feeling the very opposite of faith.

First, they wickedly raise a controversy as to the fear and dread which Christ felt, though these are openly affirmed by the Evangelists. For before the hour of His death arrived, He was troubled in spirit, and affected with grief; and at the very onset began to be exceedingly amazed. To speak of these feelings as merely assumed, is a shameful evasion. It becomes us, therefore (as Ambrose truly teaches) boldly to profess the agony of Christ, if we are not ashamed of the cross.

And certainly had not His soul shared in the punishment, He would have been a Redeemer of bodies only. The object of His struggle was to raise up those who were lying prostrate; and so far is this from detracting from His heavenly glory, that His goodness, which can never be sufficiently extolled, becomes more conspicuous in this, that He declined not to bear our infirmities. Hence also that solace to our anxieties and griefs which the Apostle sets before us: "We have not an high priest who cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all respects tempted like as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15).

These men pretend that a thing in its nature vicious is improperly ascribed to Christ; as if they were wiser than the Spirit of God, who in the same passage reconciles the two things, namely, that He was tempted in all respects like as we are, and yet was without sin. There is no reason, therefore, to take alarm at infirmity in Christ, infirmity to which He submitted not under the constraint of violence and necessity, but merely because He loved and pitied us.

Whatever He spontaneously suffered, detracts in no degree from His majesty. One thing which misleads these detractors is, that they do not recognize in Christ an infirmity which was pure and free from every species of taint, inasmuch as it was kept within the limits of obedience. As no moderation can be seen in the depravity of our nature, in which all affections with turbulent impetuosity exceed their due bounds, they improperly apply the same standard to the Son of God. But as He was upright, all His affections were under such restraint as prevented every thing like excess. Hence He could resemble us in grief, fear, and dread, but still with this mark of distinction. Thus refuted, they fly off to

another cavil, that although Christ feared death, yet He feared not the curse and wrath of God, from which He knew that He was safe.

But let the pious reader consider how far it is honorable to Christ to make Him more effeminate and timid than the generality of men. Robbers and other malefactors contumaciously hasten to death, many men magnanimously despise it, others meet it calmly. If the Son of God was amazed and terror-struck at the prospect of it, where was His firmness or magnanimity? We are even told, what in a common death would have been deemed most extraordinary, that in the depth of His agony His sweat was like great drops of blood falling to the ground. Nor was this a spectacle exhibited to the eyes of others, since it was from a secluded spot that He uttered His groans to His Father. And that no doubt may remain, it was necessary that angels should come down from heaven to strengthen Him with miraculous consolation. How shamefully effeminate would it have been (as I have observed) to be so excruciated by the fear of an ordinary death as to sweat drops of blood, and not even be revived by the presence of angels? What? Does not that prayer, three times repeated, "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from Me," (Matthew 26:39), a prayer dictated by incredible bitterness of soul, show that Christ had a fiercer and more arduous struggle than with ordinary death? Hence it appears that these triflers, with whom I am disputing, presume to talk of what they know not, never having seriously considered what is meant and implied by ransoming us from the justice of God. It is of consequence to understand aright how much our salvation cost the Son of God.

If anyone now ask, Did Christ descend to hell at the time when He deprecated death?, I answer, that this was the commencement, and that from it we may infer how dire and dreadful were the tortures which He endured when He felt Himself standing at the bar of God as a criminal in our place. And although the divine power of the Spirit veiled itself for a moment, that it might give place to the infirmity of the flesh, we must understand that the trial arising from feelings of grief and fear was such as not to be at variance with faith. And in this was fulfilled what is said in Peter's sermon as to having been loosed from the pains of death, because "it was not possible He could be holden of it" (Acts 2:24). Though feeling, as it were, forsaken of God, He did not cease in the slightest degree to confide in His goodness. This appears from the celebrated prayer in which, in the depth of his agony, He exclaimed, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46). Amid all His agony He ceases not to call upon His God, while exclaiming that He is forsaken by Him.

This refutes the Apollinarian heresy as well as that of those who are called Monothelites. Apollinaris pretended, that in Christ the eternal Spirit supplied the place of a soul, so that He was only half a man; as if He could have expiated our sins in any other way than by obeying the Father. But where does the feeling or desire of obedience reside but in the soul? And we know that His soul was troubled in order that ours, being free from trepidation, might obtain peace and quiet. Moreover, in opposition to the Monothelites, we see that in His human nature He felt a repugnance to what He willed in His divine nature. I say nothing of His subduing the fear of which we have spoken by a contrary affection. This appearance of repugnance is obvious in the words, "Father, save Me from this hour: but for this cause came I unto this hour. Father, glorify Your name" (John 12:27, 28). Still, in this perplexity, there was no violent emotion, such as we exhibit while making the strongest endeavors to subdue our own feelings.